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# Slavery and a Low Country South Carolina Merchant-Planter Elite: The Dilemma of Henry Laurens

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# SLAVERY AND A LOW COUNTRY SOUTH CAROLINA MERCHANT-PLANTER ELITE: THE DILEMMA OF HENRY LAURENS

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by

Samuel P. Cox

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree o

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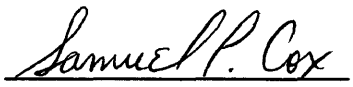

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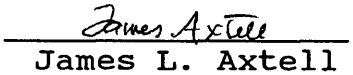

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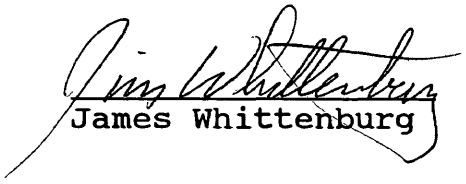

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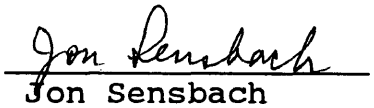

Jon Sensbach

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ABSTRACT

The history of the South Carolina Low Country in the eighteenth century was highlighted by unusually rapid economic growth and an exceptional accumulation of wealth. In fact, the South Carolina aristocracy was based almost wholly upon wealth. Fortunes were made in commercial enterprises, although one was not truly a member of the South Carolina elite until he branched out into planting. Moreover, the Charleston merchants contributed substantially to the creation of a slave economy, while the planters increasingly relied upon slaves for the accumulation of their wealth. Thus, in the South Carolina Low Country a merchant-planter elite emerged in the eighteenth century, and it was one which depended largely upon slave labor. Charleston's Henry Laurens was, by the advent of the American Revolution, perhaps the most prominent of the South Carolina merchant-planter elite.

Henry Laurens became one of the most affluent merchants in South Carolina after 1750. He was involved in virtually all goods coming in and out of Charleston, though he admitted that the trading of slaves was his "most profitable branch." He ultimately withdrew from the slave trade during the 1760s, but was by then becoming a successful planter and concentrated on administering his plantations, which were kept afloat by the many slaves that provided labor. Henry Laurens, in addition to being a successful merchant, slave trader, and planter, was also a revolutionary political leader, president of the Second Continental Congress, and a commissioner to negotiate the Peace of Independence.

Laurens has been revered in South Carolina since his death two centuries ago. Outside his native state, however, he is little known, a fact that has not sat well with South Carolina historians. The past twenty-five years have seen an increased focus by South Carolina scholars on Henry Laurens. Laurens has long been cited by historians, and recent South Carolina scholars have continued the argument, as being unique among the Low Country merchant-planter elite for having been an abolitionist. He is remembered for his withdrawal from the slave trade because of its apparent immoral implications, his reputedly kind and humane treatment of his own slaves, for expressing views that slavery be abolished throughout the United States, and for his good intentions of manumitting his slaves.

The first chapter of this thesis examines Henry Laurens' withdrawal from the slave trade, which occurred at the time when he was garnishing tremendous profits from this enterprise. Traditional historiography that cites Laurens' withdrawal predominantly because of moral and religious implications is challenged, as other personal, social, and economic grounds are investigated. The second chapter focuses on Henry Laurens as a slave-holder, challenging the traditional notion of Laurens as an abolitionist, and examining whether Laurens was substantially different from other South Carolina Low Country gentry.

# SLAVERY AND A LOW COUNTRY SOUTH CAROLINA MERCHANT-PLANTER-ELITE:

# THE DILEMMA OF HENRY LAURENS

## INTRODUCTION

The history of the South Carolina Low Country in the eighteenth century was highlighted by unusually rapid economic growth and an exceptional accumulation of wealth by the aristocracy. In fact, like their Virginia peers, the South Carolina aristocracy was based almost wholly upon wealth. The region's economic experience was due in large part to markets, merchants, and merchant capital. Although fortunes could be made in business by these merchants, one was not truly a member of the South Carolina elite until he branched out into planting. Moreover, the Charleston merchants contributed substantially to the creation of a slave economy while the planters increasingly relied upon slaves for the accumulation of their wealth. Thus, in the South Carolina Low Country a merchant-planter-elite emerged in the eighteenth century, and it was one which depended largely upon slave labor. Charleston's Henry Laurens was, by the advent of the American Revolution, perhaps the most prominent of the South Carolina merchant-planter elite.[1]

Henry Laurens became one of the most opulent merchants in

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[1]Peter A. Coclanis, "The Hydra Head of Merchant Capital: Markets and Merchants in Early South Carolina, in The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr., ed. David R. Chesnutt and Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 2; Jack P. Greene, The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia by the UNC Press, 1963), 33; Daniel Joseph McDonough, Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens: The Parallel Lives of Two American Patriots. (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Illinois, 1990), 26.

the colony after 1750. Though Laurens was actively involved in virtually all goods coming in and out of Charleston, the trading of slaves was his "most profitable branch." He ultimately withdrew from the slave trade during the 1760s, but was by then becoming a successful planter and concentrated on administering his plantations, which were kept afloat by the many slaves that provided labor. Laurens, however, has been long characterized by South Carolina historians in particular, as unique among the Low Country merchant-planter-elite for having been a leading abolitionist. He is remembered for his withdrawal from the slave trade at the height of it profits apparently because of its immoral implications, for his reputedly kind and humane treatment of his own slaves, for expressing the view that slavery be abolished throughout the United States, and for his good intentions of manumitting his slaves. Why is Laurens remembered this way, and was he in reality an abolitionist? Did he withdraw from dealing in human cargo because of its moral or religious implications? And as a slaveholder was he substantially different from the other South Carolina Lowcountry gentry? These are questions that have not been adequately addressed by scholars yet need to be investigated if one is to fully understand the Henry Laurens saga. Moreover, answers to such inquiry perhaps will enable historians to gain a better understanding of the social development of the Low Country planter-elite.

Henry Laurens, in addition to being a merchant, slave

trader, and planter, was also a revolutionary political leader, president of the Second Continental Congress, and a commissioner to negotiate the Peace of Independence. He was the eldest son of John Laurens and Hester Gresset, both children of French Huguenots. John and Hester Laurens immigrated to Charles Town, South Carolina in the early part of the eighteenth century.[2] Born in 1724, Henry Laurens spent his formative years in that Atlantic seaport and was given the best education available. In 1744 young Henry was sent by his father, by now a prosperous saddler, to London to be trained in the counting house of a prominent merchant, James Crokatt. Liking the mercantile opportunities he saw in London, he hoped to become a partner in the house of Crokatt, who had only recently moved from South Carolina himself. Due to a misunderstanding, however, Laurens returned to Charleston at the age of twenty-three after three years in London. His father died while he was in transit, so he remained in South Carolina to take care of the estate, and soon accepted a partnership with an established Charleston merchant, George Austin. He remained in Charleston, marrying Eleanor Ball in 1750. She bore him a dozen children, four of which reached maturity. Eleanor died in 1770 after complications derived from giving birth to a daughter. Except for temporary periods

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[2]Charleston was known as Charles Town until after the American Revolution. Except in quotations of contemporary writers the modern spelling of Charleston will be used for the remainder of this paper.

when he returned to Europe to secure his sons' education and to negotiate the peace with Great Britain during the American Revolution, Laurens remained in South Carolina until his death in 1792.[3]

Austin and Laurens began to conduct brisk trade, dealing in imports of manufactured goods from England and African slaves brought by Englishmen and exporting naval stores, deerskins, rice, indigo, and other Carolina products. They traded primarily with merchants in London, Bristol, and Liverpool, but extended into other port cities of Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, New England, and into the Carolina backcountry. The firm prospered and Laurens rapidly developed into an extraordinarily successful merchant and businessman, accumulating great profits from his commercial activities. He soon began buying land, ultimately owning at least eight plantations totaling approximately 24,000 acres in the Cooper, Santee, and Nintey Six regions of South Carolina as well as along the Georgia coast. He also owned several hundred slaves to work his extensive plantation network. By the American Revolution, Laurens was one of the wealthiest men in the Carolinas and perhaps in all of British North America.

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[3]Helen Henning, Great South Carolinians: From Colonial Days to the Confederate War, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 64; James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," (Unpublished paper, copy obtained from Darold D. Wax, 1991), 1; Philip M. Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina -- The Man and his Papers," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, LXXVII (Boston, 1966), 3-4; Lillian Belk Youell, "Henry Laurens: The Neglected Negotiator," Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine, (Aug-Sep, 1983), 708.

Historian Richard J. Hargrove asserted that Henry Laurens embodied "a family tradition of almost single-minded devotion to the accumulation of wealth."[4]

Following his success as a merchant and planter, Laurens became a major political player during the American Revolution, helping to make decisions which affected the course of the war and development of the new nation. From 1775 to 1776, as royal authority in South Carolina disintegrated, Laurens took an increasingly prominent role in public affairs, serving as President of the Provincial Congress and of the Council of Safety. He assisted in the writing of South Carolina's first constitution in 1776, and was chosen Vice-President of the new state. Elected as a South Carolina delegate to the Continental Congress in 1777, he succeeded John Hancock as President of the Second Continental Congress. In 1780 he was sent by Congress to negotiate a loan and treaty with Holland. While at sea, he was captured by the British and imprisoned in the Tower of London under suspicion of high treason. In 1781, while still in the tower, Laurens was named by Congress to its commission

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[4]Jack P. Greene, The Quest for Power, 133; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 4; The Papers of Henry Laurens, 13 volumes (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968-1992), I, Henry Laurens to Thomas Savage, 11 November 1747, 83, To James Crokatt, 23 November 1747, 88, To Samuel Lawrence, 25 March 1748, 125, To Peter Bard & Henry Elwes, 28 March 1748, 126, To James Crokatt, 10 February 1749, 208; Carl Bridenbaugh, Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1952), 68; David C. Roller and Robert W. Twyman, eds., The Encyclopedia of Southern History (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1979), 709; Richard J. Hargrove, "Portrait of a Southern Patriot: The Life and Death of John Laurens," in The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership, ed. W. Robert Higgins (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 201.

to negotiate a peace treaty with Britain. In declining health, Laurens returned to the United States in 1784, arriving in Charleston the following year. He spent most of his remaining years at his plantation, "Mepkin," located just outside the city.[5]

Although revered in South Carolina since his death two centuries ago, and in spite of his success as a merchant, planter, and revolutionary political leader, Laurens is little known outside his native state, "a neglected patriot of the Revolution, overshadowed in death by . . . less worthy contemporaries." Historian Philip Hamer, who spent much of his scholarly career studying Laurens, argued that Laurens earned the respect of his own generation and thus warranted the attention of the present one. He emphasized that soon after Laurens took his seat in Congress, John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail that Laurens was "a great acquisition . . . of the first Rank in his State, Lt. Governor, of ample fortune, of great Experience, having been 20 Years in their assembly, of a clear Head and a firm Temper, of extensive Knowledge, and much Travel." Adams continued that Laurens "has hitherto appeared as good a Member, as any We have ever had in Congress. I wish that all the States would imitate

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[5]Laura P. Frech, The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," South Carolina Historical Magazine 76 (April 1975), 68; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 507.

this example and send their best Men."[6]

Despite John Adams's laudatory remarks, Henry Laurens has continued to remain largely unnoticed outside his home state. South Carolina historians have long attempted to correct this oversight and give Laurens his warranted place in the history books. Often, they have done so by lavishing praise upon their native son. His son-in-law, the physician and historian David Ramsay, wrote in the early nineteenth century of Laurens' "love of Justice," devotion to family and business, his exemplary religious zeal, and his kind treatment of slaves. David Duncan Wallace, Laurens's lone biographer, wrote in 1915 that Laurens' "life-long trait of kindness of heart became more pronounced with age," and echoed Ramsay's depiction of Laurens as an astute businessman, praiseworthy national leader and diplomat, and a man devoted to God and family. Philip Hamer argued in the 1970s for Laurens' place in history, and George C. Rogers, Jr., venerable South Carolina historian, revealed in January 1992 that "Henry Laurens is my hero . . . because he embodied in himself all those characteristics which we should admire if we want our democratic society to endure." The question still remains, however, whether Henry Laurens is worthy of this hero status and whether his role as a slave trader and slaveholder should effect this status. A deeper analysis of precisely why Henry

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[6]Warner Oland Moore, Jr., Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771. (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Alabama, 1974), 1; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 3.

Laurens withdrew from trading slaves is necessary, as is examination whether his attitude as a slaveholder was unique among Low Country gentry.[7]

## CHAPTER I

## A CHARLESTON SLAVE MERCHANT:

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[7]David Ramsay, M.D., Ramsay's History of South Carolina, From its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808, Vol. II (1858; reprint, Newberry, SC: W.J. Duffie, 1960), 160-163; David D. Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, With a Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 65; George C. Rogers, Jr., "A Tribute to Henry Laurens," South Carolina Historical Magazine 88 (January 1992), 269.

## HENRY LAURENS' WITHDRAWAL FROM THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Henry Laurens certainly merits a position of high standing in the history books. Many scholars, however, have tended to overlook certain characteristics of the man in their attempts to elevate Laurens to a position of prominence. As one of the most successful South Carolina merchants during the eighteenth century, one key aspect of Laurens' commercial enterprises was his involvement in the slave trade. Historian James A. Rawley has described Laurens as one of the largest slave merchants in the second period of Carolina importation (1750-1775), who "assiduously solicited commission business in Negroes." Rawley asserted that Laurens' slaving career almost exactly coincided with a peak of the Atlantic slave trade, while Elizabeth Donnan argued in 1935 that "the history of the Carolina trade is largely to be written from the Laurens letters."[8]

Although scholars have studied Laurens's involvement in the slave trade, little work has been produced concerning why he ultimately withdrew from this business. After nearly a decade and a half as a factor in the slave trade, by the early 1760s Laurens began having reservations concerning slave trading. He soon decided to forego this part of his

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[8]James A. Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, A History, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 412; Elizabeth Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume IV, The Border Colonies and the Southern Colonies, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute, 1935), 300.

mercantile activities. Laurens gave a number of reasons for giving up the trade, yet David D. Wallace, who devoted a chapter of his Laurens biography to Laurens' involvement in the slave trade, explored only one of the reasons for Laurens' resigning the trade. Wallace concluded that Laurens withdrew from the trade for humanitarian reasons. He argued that Laurens was a fervent Christian who felt that the dealing of slaves compromised his religious convictions; faced with an ethical dilemma, as he netted great profits from this branch of trade, Laurens ultimately withdrew from the slave trade in the 1760s. Wallace posited that Laurens dropped out of the trade "about 1762/3," before being compelled by law, and only once did he break his resolution. In 1764, Wallace contended, Laurens consented "for some very particular considerations" to sell an incoming cargo of slaves. Wallace insisted that a businessman seeking to lighten his labors would hardly begin by dropping his most profitable branch, and "it is plain that revulsion of the cruelties of the slave trade exercised a strong influence."[9]

Wallace asserted that "A shining illustration of how Laurens governed his business by the dictates of humanity" was found in a letter Laurens wrote to his friend William Fisher

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[9]Laurens was also involved in six importations of slave cargoes from the West Indies between 1762 and 1769 before finally relinquishing the trade. Wallace, then, was not entirely accurate in his assessment. David Duncan Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, With A Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant-Colonel John Laurens (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 88, 90.

of Philadelphia. In 1768 Laurens wrote:

> I have been largely concerned in the African Trade. I quitted the profits arising from that gainful branch principally because of many acts from the masters and others concerned toward the wretched negroes from the time of purchasing to that of selling them again, some of which, although within my knowledge, were uncontrollable . . . . I cannot forbear opposing the unjust man and the oppressor.

Wallace could find no other viable reasons why Laurens may have withdrawn from trading slaves, and tried valiantly to place Laurens on a pedestal of moral righteousness. Wallace failed to explore other reasons for Laurens' actions, perhaps the result of a racial defensiveness that would have not been uncommon for an historian from South Carolina in 1915.[10]

The humanitarian argument has been passed down through generations of scholars. Helen Henning asserted in 1940 that Laurens "really gave up the buying and selling of slaves because he could not stand it to have human beings so cruelly treated." But, she continued, Laurens was such a humble and conscientious man that instead of frankly admitting his compassion for the Africans, he almost apologized, because he did not want others to feel that he was meddling in their business or criticizing friends. In a 1951 history of South Carolina, David Wallace again confronted Laurens' withdrawal from the slave trade. This time he argued that Laurens refrained from re-entering the trade upon its re-opening in 1769 because he "was twitted with entertaining scruples. His

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[10]Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 67; Laurens to William Fisher, 9 November 1768, Laurens Papers, VI, 149-150.

pretense of other reasons revealed the fear of one of the wealthiest merchants to face sneer which almost the whole community would have visited upon anyone considering the slave trade immoral." Sara Townsend argued in 1958 that Laurens was a devout Christian who resigned from the slave trade because "his conscience forbade the practice." Daniel Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, in their history of the slave trade, commented that Laurens left the trade "which he had come to regard as evil." In 1968 Philip Hamer wrote in the preface to the first volume of the Laurens Papers that, although as a younger man Laurens had traded in slaves and had profited thereby, he became the first prominent man in the Lower South to decry the institution of slavery. Hamer made no attempt to explain why Laurens terminated slave trading, other than "his abhorrence of the institution" itself.[11]

Thus, since Wallace's work over seventy-five years ago, historians of the slave trade as well as South Carolina scholars have recorded that Laurens voluntarily left the trading of slaves, generally echoing Wallace that this

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[11]From 1 January 1766 until 1 January 1769 the importation of slaves into South Carolina was effectively terminated because of prohibitive duties and taxes placed on incoming cargoes by the colonial Assembly. The duties were lifted and trade resumed as before on 1 January 1769. Laurens, of course, was forced to refrain from active importation of slaves during this three year period. Wallace, South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948 (1951, reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1961), 219; Helen Kohn Henning, Great South Carolinians: From Colonial Days to the Confederate War (1940; reprint, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 64-65; Sara Bertha Townsend, An American Soldier: The Life of John Laurens, 12-13; Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865 (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), 174; Philip M. Hamer, "Introduction," Papers of Henry Laurens, I, xvii-xviii.

withdrawal was for humanitarian reasons. Little research has been done to suggest that Laurens may have retired from the slave trade on other grounds. In expressing a desire that a truthful record of his life be produced, Laurens wrote his son John that

> I wish you or somebody else would publish a fair and honest compilation from . . . my papers. You know me too well to suppose I would in a little exaggerate or suppress . . . let the whole be cleverly done and introduced by such declaration of candour as these accounts are well entitled to; nothing is more abhorrent to me than publication of falsehood for truth.

Two centuries later, with the publication of many of Laurens's papers, no extensive examination has yet been made concerning the reasons for his withdrawal from the slave trade. A "fair compilation" of his papers still needs to address this issue. Perhaps this might better illuminate Laurens's motivations and help to ascertain whether other factors were involved.

Although Henry Laurens was a prominent statesman and political figure as well as a successful merchant and planter, the man cannot be separated from his prolific involvement in the African slave trade. Before examining his retirement from the slave trade, a concise synopsis of his involvement is necessary. While in England for a brief second visit in 1749, Laurens toured mercantile firms, seeking "the African Trade" for his newly formed partnership with Austin. His letters, beginning in January 1749, were filled with instructions to dealers in Liverpool and Bristol for the shipment of slaves. On January 20, 1749, in a letter to John Knight of Liverpool,

he advised that if he wished "to try a cargo of slaves at Carolina, I can venture to assure you there is a prospect of pretty good sales as rice promises to be a good commodity." On the same day he wrote Liverpool slave merchant Edward Trafford that "I think there's a prospect of most advantage to be made by the Guinea Trade as we have reason to expect good sales for Negroes in that colony [Barbados]." One month later Laurens wrote another merchant, James Pardoe, that "I have one Letter which says Negroes would sell at a monstrous price."[12]

Throughout his mercantile career Laurens continued to conduct heavy correspondence informing shippers of supply and demand, prices of slaves and other commodities, and explaining the terms on which he would handle cargoes. He also began advising and training young merchants, a practice that continued long after he withdrew from directly trading Africans himself. The slave trade paid twice the ordinary commissions of other goods (ten per cent versus five per cent) and normally moved quickly; profits were generally large. Beginning in 1751, when Laurens and George Austin sold their first slaves, the partnership experienced phenomenal growth until it was one of the largest companies engaged in the slave trade in the 1750s. George Appleby, Austin's nephew, joined the firm before the close of the decade, and they continued to

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[12]Louis B. Wright, South Carolina: A Bicentennial History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 105; Henry Laurens to John Knight, 20 January 1749, Henry Laurens to Edward Trafford, 20 January 1749, Henry Laurens to James Pardoe, 21 February 1749, The Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 205, 204, 213.

rank high among the Carolina slave merchants.[13]

The three most important slave ports in the eighteenth century were Liverpool, Bristol, and London. Laurens traded with merchants in all of these cities. British merchants financed much of the slave business and sent the greatest number of Africans to America. Laurens' most regular clients in Liverpool were John Knight, Thomas Mears, and William Whaley; in Bristol Devonsheir and Reeve, Thomas Easton and Company. Richard Oswald was an important customer in London. Laurens acquired slaves periodically from various Lancaster merchants as well. He also received sporadic shipments from the West Indies, his most important consignments coming from Smith and Baillies and Day and Welch, both of St. Christophers. It was rare for Laurens to receive slaves from merchants in the American colonies.[14]

The firm of Austin and Laurens imported forty-five slave cargoes between 1751 and 1758. Early on they relied on Caribbean re-exports, receiving seventeen cargoes in this manner, and overall acquiring twenty-eight cargoes directly from Africa. Austin's nephew George Appleby shared in the partnership from 1759 to 1761, during which time the house

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[13]Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 47; Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771," 154.

[14]Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771," 155-156; Simon Rothenberg, "The Business of Slave Trading," South Atlantic Quarterly LXVI (1967), 411; Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, IV, 191, 220-222, 347n; Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, A History, 412-415.

imported sixteen cargoes, all but two from Africa. Following this period the other two partners quit the firm, leaving Laurens as the lone proprietor after 1762. He immediately reduced his acceptances of slave consignments, importing a single cargo from Africa, in association with two other merchants, and six from the West Indies, all between 1762 and 1769. Laurens had terminated his direct involvement in the slave trade by the decade's close.[15]

By any standard Laurens was one of the largest Charleston slave merchants. In 1755 he called his firm's slaving activities "small" yet he sold approximately 700 Africans each year, a substantial proportion of Charleston's trade. Between 1752 and 1756, Austin and Laurens advertised more slaves for sale in the South Carolina Gazette than any other factor. Historian Warner Moore estimated that Laurens' firm imported a total of 7,601 slaves from 1751 through 1769. The decade of the 1750s saw Laurens and partners responsible for one-third of all slaves imported into Charleston during the period, and about one-tenth of all slaves imported into South Carolina between 1735 and 1775. W. Robert Higgins studied Charleston merchants and factors dealing in the external slave trade during the period 1735-1775. He asserted that Charleston

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[15]Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, A History, 413. See also Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 174701771." Moore comes up with a slightly different figure of sixty imports from 1751 to 1761 (versus Rawley's total of sixty-one), based on information obtained from the South Carolina Gazette, Naval Office Lists, Records of the Public Treasurers of South Carolina, and The Papers of Henry Laurens. Rawley's estimate is the more current (1981 versus 1974).

merchants supplied blacks for some thirty-two places throughout the Lower South, and came up with a list of 405 names of Charleston importers. Laurens' firms headed the list. Laurens' prominence in the slave trade came nearly at that practice's peak, in the middle of the eighteenth century, both for the trade as a whole and for British activity in it. Nearly every letter Laurens wrote during the 1750s dealt with the slave trade in some capacity. This branch of his mercantile life seemed to excite him as a new and fascinating commercial challenge. He met this challenge with great success.[16]

The demand for slaves was largely influenced by the success of crops. Indigo gave a boost to the slave market during the years of Laurens' activity. He wrote in 1756 that "The price of Slaves here is wholly influenc'd by the value of our staples, Rice and Indigo." The previous year Laurens had

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[16]W. Robert Higgins projects the total of slaves imported into Charleston between 1735 and 1775 to be 70,887. The total for the years 1735-1773, according to the Historical Statistics of the United States is 65,730. Robert M. Weir estimated that about 42,000 Africans were imported into South Carolina between 1760 and 1774, with the largest single group coming from the southwest coast of Africa, "Angola." He also estimated that more than 40% of all blacks who came to North America from 1700 to the end of the colonial period probably came through Charleston. Furthermore, Philip D. Curtin calculated that during the 1750s, when Laurens was most active in the slave trade, approximately 21.4 per cent of the total slave imports into British America were imported to the southern mainland. Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771," 192-194; W. Robert Higgins, "Charleston Merchants and Factors Dealing in the External Negro Trade, 1735-1775," South Carolina Historical Magazine LXV (Oct. 1964), 205-217; James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 9-10; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, DC, 1960), 770; Robert M. Weir, Colonial South Carolina: A History (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1983), 173, 178; The Papers of Henry Laurens, I, II, III; Philip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade, A Census (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 266.

written that "We shall have a great deal offer'd to us from such Persons as deal with us for Slaves from Williamsburgh Township which affords in general the best Indigo." Like other Charleston merchants, he at first remitted to English creditors rice and indigo in payment for slaves. Laurens and the other slave factors collected commissions of five per cent on sales and another five per cent on returns, out of which he paid local fees and costs. In 1756 Laurens could write, "We have been enabled for some years past to remit for our Negro Sales totally in bills, almost."[17]

As the production of indigo boomed, planters demanded more slaves. Laurens repeatedly complained that his correspondents did not send him as many blacks as he wanted. As early as 1750, as Laurens prepared to enter the slave trade, he noted that "The planters are full of money." By 1755 he was able to write to Bristol merchants Corsely, Rogers & Son that "The price of Slaves hitherto continues very good & will hold so the present Year if the Imports don't exceed the demands . . . ." In May of the same year Laurens wrote the merchants Devonsheir, Reeve, & Lloyd that, after a dry spring, the indigo crop should nonetheless be productive, thus "a fine cargo of Slaves would do well just now." Also in the

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[17]Henry Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 13 April 1756 and Laurens to Samuel Linnecar, 8 May 1756, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 170, 178; Robert L. Meriwether, The Expansion of South Carolina (Kingsport, TN: Southern Publishers, Inc., 1940), 83. See also Randall M. Miller and John Smith, eds., Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 683.

spring of 1755 Laurens wrote Bristol merchant Charles Gwynn that if war developed with the French, the indigo planters would want "more Slaves, Warr or not."[18]

In addition to bumper crops of indigo and rice having a profound effect on demand for slaves, other factors also played a role. In 1755 many planters feared imminent conflict with the French. With this apprehension came a fear of interruptions in the availability of Africans. This led to an increasing demand for slaves and a concurrent increase in prices during the summer of 1755. Governor James Glen had informed the Board of Trade the previous year that sales of Negroes in Carolina were at better prices than were paid in other parts of the "King's Dominions." Prices continued to rise the following year, and Laurens wrote that "our planters are in full spirits for purchasing slaves and have almost all their money hoarded up for that purpose." Laurens corresponded in June that "Such a price . . . was never obtain'd before for Angola Slaves at this Market . . . had we had double the number on that day it would have been much too short for the Buyers that attended at that Sale." In July Laurens wrote that 250 slaves quickly sold and "a thousand Slaves would not have supplied [the planters'] wants." He

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[18]M. Eugene Sirmans, Colonial South Carolina: A Political History, 1663-1763 (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the UNC Press, 1966), 317; Henry Laurens cited by Carl Bridenbaugh, Myths and Realities, 67; Laurens to Corsely, Rogers & Son, 16 May 1755, Laurens to Devonsheir, Reeve, and Lloyd, 22 May 1755, Laurens to Charles Gwynn, 28 May 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 249, 252, 269.

wrote another merchant concerning the same public sale that some of the buyers were so eager for the recent slave cargo that they "went to collaring each other & would have come to blows had it not been prevented."[19]

Historian Daniel Littlefield contended that the slaves most preferred, and most valuable, were native Carolinians who, said Governor Glen, "may on all occasions be more relyed on than Guinea Slaves." This attitude was clearly expressed in notices of slaves for sale. Those in the country long enough to be acclimated and so not as risky a venture as new slaves, were next in order of value. The planters wanted "seasoned" slaves. Henry Laurens was certainly concerned with this issue, because his pocketbook was at stake. He wrote in the spring of 1765 that "Yesterday I bought for my own use 16 New Negro Men & Boys at L300 per Head, & 4 Women at 260," while continuing that "Those I have purchased for Mr[.] Oswald are undoubtedly much cheaper every body says so, tho the New ones intermixed with my Old Plantation Slaves will incorporate well enough for my purposes."[20]

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[19]Laurens also wrote that there was "pulling and hauling" over who should "get the good slaves," and that there were "people enough in town that day to have taken off a thousand good slaves." Laurens to Charles Gwynn, 12 June 1755, Laurens to Thomas Easton & Co., 27 June 1755, Laurens to Devonsheir, Reeve, & Lloyd, 31 July 1755, Laurens to Thomas Easton & Co., 31 July 1755, Laurens to Corsley & Son, 1 August 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 263, 276, 304, 307, 308.

[20]Daniel Littlefield, "'Abundance of Negroes of that Nation': The Significance of African Ethnicity in Colonial South Carolina," in The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr., ed. David R. Chesnutt and Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 19; Laurens to James Grant, 20 April 1765, cited in Littlefield, 23.

Southern planters demonstrated a preference for slaves imported from specific regions in Africa. South Carolina buyers held a bias for slaves from the "Gold Coast" and Gambia. Laurens wrote a St. Christopher's correspondent, Smith and Clifton, that "Gold Coast or Gambia's are best, next to them the Windward Coast are preferred to Angola's." Similarly, Laurens noted that "The Slaves from the River Gambia are preferr'd to all others with us save from the Gold Coast." He complained to the St. Christophers firm of William Wells, Jr. and Peter Carew that he wished they had sent, instead of rum, "a few prime Negro Men of any Country but Callaburs," and to Langton, Shepard & Company he protested a parcel of "Angolas which Our People dont like very well." With so much at financial stake, Laurens wanted to please his customers.[21]

While Henry Laurens held his finger on the pulse of the African slave trade during its apex in the mid-eighteenth century, he ultimately withdrew from direct importation during the 1760s. By the turn of the decade, he began to display reservations about continuing the practice, and by 1762 claimed to have left off the selling of slaves (though, as noted above, he continued for another seven years on a reduced scale). Although Wallace posited that Laurens' motives were

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[21]Laurens to Smith & Clifton, 17 July 1755, Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 17 May 1756, Laurens to Langton, Shepard & Co., 19 August 1756, and Laurens to William Wells, Jr. and Peter Carew, 9 September 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 295, 186, 290, 333.

predominantly based on Christian moral and ethical grounds, Laurens himself admitted to a number of reasons for forgoing the African trade. Religion played a role in his decision, but was it his chief motivation?

Laurens was, in fact, a profoundly religious man highly concerned with the moral messages proclaimed in the Scriptures. Historian Laura Frech has noted that Laurens displayed an unusually strong strain of religious enthusiasm. While he had been affected by the pervasive rationalism of the eighteenth century, she argued, Laurens belonged in the evangelical rather than the rational stream of American Protestantism. His friends considered him quite pious, as is evidenced in his letters. He wrote that he could not help but carry "a little mantle of Religion about me. Indeed I will not be laughed out of it." He added that it was the only source "from whence we can hope to derive any vital warmth when the cold hand of Death is stretching forth to arrest us."[22]

Although he was an Anglican, Laurens preferred, according to Frech, the pietism of the German sects and the evangelism of the English preacher, George Whitefield. Laurens, in fact, was heavily influenced by Whitefield and the Great Awakening, and his religious enthusiasm was considerably more extreme than that of many revolutionary leaders who tended toward

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[22]Laura Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," South Carolina Historical Magazine 76 (April 1975), 76, 78, 79.

Deism. He wrote to the Moravian Bishop John Ettwein, a personal friend and business associate in Salem, North Carolina, that he thought their "religious sentiments are so little different" that he was confident that upon death they would both "attain to an everlasting communion in the presence of the one ever Blessed and adorable God, Father[,] Son and Spirit." David Ramsay made Laurens sound like a Puritan. "In the performance of his religious duties," he noted, "Mr. Laurens was strict and exemplary. The emergency was great which kept him from church either forenoon or afternoon, and very great indeed which kept him from his regular monthly communion." Ramsay continued his description: "With the Bible he was intimately acquainted. Its doctrines he firmly believed . . . and was much in the habit of quoting" from the Bible. He added that his father-in-law not only read the scriptures diligently to his family, but made his children read them also. While Laurens was an evangelical Christian influenced by itinerants such as Whitefield, he differed from some of his Low Country peers such as Hugh Bryan, also heavily influenced by Whitefield, in that Laurens apparently was not particularly concerned with having the Gospel shared with his slaves. This was a contradiction of his faith and may have played a role in further stifling his own spiritual freedom.[23]

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[23]Laurens to John Edwin [Ettwein], 19 March 1763, cited in Frech, 79; Edmund S. Morgan, "Puritan Ethic," William and Mary Quarterly XXIV (January 1967), 28-29; David Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 261; Harvey H. Jackson, "Hugh Bryan and the Evangelical Movement in Colonial South Carolina, William and Mary Quarterly XLII (October 1986),

Although from a twentieth-century perspective scriptural teachings may not have been consistent with slavery or the slave trade, certainly many white Christians in colonial America, and later in the antebellum South, did their best to rationalize the harmonious existence of slavery and Christianity. What separated Henry Laurens from many of these other southern Christians was that he withdrew from the trade and later denounced slavery itself. Laurens himself revealed in his letters that the impetus was drawn from a number of sources. In a bitter pamphlet war with Charleston judge Egerton Leigh in 1769, Laurens defended his withdrawal from the trade for reasons other than religious (which Wallace would argue was the inability of this South Carolina patriot to face public sneers). Leigh condemned Laurens in a pamphlet, "The Man Unmasked," as vain and arrogant, once heavily involved in the slave trade and continuing to advise young merchants even after abdicating direct involvement. Leigh charged that Laurens was outwardly motivated by piety and religion, that he read "the Revelations . . . and finding that *Slaves* and the souls of men are also in the enumerated list [of prohibitions], swears that St. John meant . . . the pernicious practice of the *African Trade*; he therefore withdrew himself from the horrid and barbarious connection." Leigh added that Laurens, though no longer dealing in the trading of slaves, retained for himself "a few of those

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precious *jewels* which he had heretofore amassed, some of the *wages* of this *abominable trade*, for an old ballad relates, that *'gold in handling will stick to the fingers like meal.'*"[24]

Laurens responded to Leigh's charges by denying humanitarian hypocrisy, responding that he gave up slave dealing because he had no partner and business was too heavy. He assaulted Leigh's criticisms of his withdrawal from the slave trade as "false, calumnious, and foolish," and added that "What Benefit is it to the Public to know the Motives and Principles from which I quitted the African Branch of Commerce?" An angry Laurens continued by insisting that he had "several Reasons for retiring from that Trade, and among others, I was weary of constant Application to a Counting-House . . . . I had no Partner, and was not disposed to engage one," and was "resolved not to receive Commissions without fully earning them." He had withdrawn from the trade in 1762, Laurens contended, transferring his business to "good Friends." He concluded by asking Leigh if there was "any Crime . . . in my resignation of the African Trade?"[25]

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[24]Egerton Leigh, who as judge of the vice-admiralty court in Charleston, had presided over three cases involving Henry Laurens' trading vessels. Only one vessel was condemned by the court, but Laurens became convinced that Leigh's decisions in the cases were neither fair nor impartial. A series of bitter pamphlets ensued during 1769 between the two men. Egerton Leigh, The Man Unmasked: or, the World Undeceived (Charles Town, 1769), in Papers of Henry Laurens, VI, 465, 528.

[25]Henry Laurens, "Appendix to the Extracts from the Proceedings of the High Court of Vice-Admiralty in Charleston, South Carolina, &c," August 3, 1769, in Papers of Henry Laurens, VII, 99-100.

Laurens certainly claimed at times to have humanitarian motivations for relinquishing the trading of slaves. In addition to revealing to William Fisher of Philadelphia that he withdrew because of the poor treatment some slaves received, he also lamented the horrors of the "Guinea Business" to Henry Bright, a Bristol slave trader. Laurens deplored such events as that of nine Africans brought by the Sally in 1769, whereby he described a "poor pining creature" who "hanged herself with a piece of small vine which shews her carcass was not very weighty." He rhetorically asked "who that views the above Picture can love the African trade?"[26]

Late in his life Laurens addressed the Speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives concerning slavery. In this speech of 1785 Laurens recalled that "The time was, when we solemnly engaged against further importations under a pretense of working by gradual steps of total abolition. We were then indeed in a religious mood and had appealed to God." While the slave trade might well have presented an ethical dilemma for Laurens, generally he did not express religious or moral reasons at the time for retiring from this commercial activity. He seemed to have gone through cyclic 'religious moods,' and when these moods were less prevalent, business concerns took priority in his life. And the times whereby he did express humanitarian concern, it was soon stifled by more

[26]Laurens to Henry Bright & Co., 31 October 1769, Papers of Henry Laurens, VII, 192.

pragmatic actions. Laurens' memory seems clouded with time, for his religious mood did not play the role that he would have liked. While Laurens did eventually terminate trading slaves, his moral aversion to the practice, though certainly a burden to his spiritual comfort at times, was not a chief factor in motivating him to withdraw.[27]

War was another factor which increased Laurens' anxiety over the slave trade, primarily for financial reasons. Early in his slaving career, he was concerned by 1755 that war with France might harm the trade, though that year, with the threat of impending conflict, slave cargoes sold well. In August of that year he noted that the sale of slaves had "been very brisk" and would likely "hold so 'till next Summer if we dont become engaged in a War." The following month, Laurens wrote Thomas Mears & Co. that "The nearer we Seem to a Warr the more Mad some of our People seem to be after Slaves." Laurens suspected that planters wanted to stock up on slaves in case war broke out and closed the trade. By September 1755 he predicted that "when a declaration of War shall reach us which we are daily expecting it must greatly alter the system [of selling slave cargoes]."[28]

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[27]Laurens to the Speaker of the S.C. House of Representatives, 31 January 1785, cited in Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 447.

[28]Laurens expressed similar sentiments again and again. He wrote Charles Gwynn, for example, in June 1755 that "barring a War with France the price of Slaves will hold." Laurens to Augustus & John Boyd & Co., 23 September 1755, Laurens to Thomas Mears & Co., 26 September 1755, Laurens to Devonsheir, Reeve, & Lloyd, 31 July 1755, Laurens to William Jeffries, 30 September 1755, and Laurens to Charles Gwynn, 12 June 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 340, 347, 304, 351, and 264.

By February 1756 Laurens expressed concern that the "uncertain state we are in as to Peace or War very much perplexes us in Merchantile Affairs." He noted that insurance costs were high, as were freights, while the price of slaves suddenly began to decrease. In April 1756, upon reports that the French had declared war, Laurens responded: "Wherefore we must turn Our thoughts at present from the Affrica [sic] Business which Cant do for this present year at least and think of some Other branch that may Carry a more favourable aspect." Although the Seven Years' War did not completely halt the importation of Africans into South Carolina, it did force a reduction in the number of cargoes brought into the colonies, while certainly raising the anxiety of Laurens. He more than once indicated a fear of the French taking "Negro Ships." He did not initially reduce his number of slave cargoes drastically, but he did reveal, for the first time, a concern over the risks of the trade. By the end of the war, Laurens had begun to reduce his slave trading activities. In 1759 Laurens, Austin, and Appleby advertised three slave cargoes for sale, and in 1760 the firm handled six slave consignments, five of which has at least 180 slaves. The next year, however, he handled large slave consignments directly from Africa for the final time, while in 1762 and 1763 he did not act as a factor in the slave trade at all. The Seven Years' War placed a burden on Laurens' business that he had not experienced before. Moreover, financial anxiety forced

him to reassess this branch of his commercial enterprises. This financial *angst* likely affected his decision to withdraw, at least temporarily, from the slaving business. Other factors, as we shall see, later influenced him to refrain from re-entering.[29]

The perils of war and piracy drove up insurance rates on slave cargoes. The outbreak of the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution each sent rates soaring. Historian James A. Rawley noted that in 1753 a voyage from Africa to Jamaica was insured at ten per cent, but in late 1755 Henry Laurens was complaining that the "great probability of a sudden War" had forced up insurance rates to fifteen or sixteen percent. At the same time, slave prices decreased; Laurens recorded in December 1755 prices had dropped from L330 per head to L260-275, and "have been daily declining in price." The triangular voyage had always involved some risks because it was long and lines of communication between equity sharers and ships' captains and agents were slow. Risks of piracy and the rampant spread of disease among the slave cargoes also increased the risks and therefore the insurance. The war with France added further to the existing risks. Spiraling insurance rates coupled with decreasing sale prices of slaves made the Seven Years' War a period when Laurens likely began

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[29]Laurens to Foster Cunliffe & Sons, 24 February 1756, Laurens to John Knight, 10 April 1756, Laurens to Maxwell & Udney, 7 January 1757, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 106, 157, 401-402; Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771," 190-191.

to doubt his future in the slave trade.[30]

By 1762 Laurens made a conscious decision to withdraw from the slave trade. Throughout the spring and summer of that year, Laurens repeatedly wrote that "only one crop of Negroes sold this year." He recorded this phrase in more than a dozen letters during the last several months of 1762. These concerns were raised during and after the summer and fall, seasons normally most promising for the sale of slave cargoes. Laurens seemed concerned over the stability of the trade; this anxiety likely was a factor in his withdrawal. It is perhaps even more significant that Laurens abandoned the trade in late 1762, when he no longer had partners. The firm of Austin, Laurens, and Appleby dissolved on the First of August 1762. George Austin left the firm because of poor health and George Appleby was preparing to return to England. The next year Laurens remarked, on declining the "African trade," that "less Capital than I have in position often been employ'd to wield more business than three or four Cargoes of Negroes per annum can create[,] but I would in this uncertain Climate and for other considerations endeavor to avoid embarrassment."[31]

Laurens asserted, also in 1763, that as "a single hand in

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[30]James A. Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 340; Laurens to Law, Satterthwaite, & Jones, 14 December 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 37; Simon Rottenberg, "The Business of Slave Trading," The South Atlantic Quarterly LXVI (1967), 421.

[31]Laurens revealed details of the dissolution of Laurens, Austin, and Appleby to several correspondents. One in particular was Laurens to Coxe & Furman & Co., 6 November 1762, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 150; James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 11; Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 6 February 1772, Papers of Henry Laurens, VIII, 444.

trade & for other considerations that I should have nothing more to do in that branch of Commerce." He was tempted to join his old associate John Knight in late 1763, but finally refused, adhering to his "former plan of Shunning the African Trade." The following spring Laurens wrote that he had declined the trade because it was "too Cumbrous & too important for a single hand for many obvious reasons." He again echoed these sentiments to former partner George Appleby in the fall of 1764 when he revealed that he was "very loth to touch business [of trading slaves] . . . without the assistance of a partner." In November Laurens wrote the merchant Abraham Parsons that his reason for declining "several African Ships" was "that being a single hand I did not care to embark in concerns of such importance too great for me in my best health & Subjecting the Intrest [sic] of my very good friends to great risques in case of sickness of death. The same consideration will forbid me to ingage [sic] with your Prince of Wales." In 1769 Laurens responded to Egerton Leigh in their pamphlet war that he had relinquished slave cargoes because he was "weary of constant Application to a Counting-House," and "had no Partner." Laurens thus began to retire from slave trading at precisely the time he was left without partners. He believed that he jeopardized his friends' investments by acting as a factor without the assistance of a partner, and felt the business was too

cumbersome -- and financially risky -- alone.[32]

In 1764, soon after Laurens had begun to withdraw from dealing slaves, he wrote merchant Edward Martin that he was determined not to sell a cargo of slaves "unless I find it necessary for my friends' interest to interfere." He made no reference to humanitarian concerns; even if that were an issue, he would potentially place "friends' interest" above the welfare of the Africans for whom he supposedly was so concerned. The previous year Laurens had expressed similar sentiments to John Knight, when he revealed that he would "rather not pursue that Trade," yet would take care of the cargo for Knight even if he had to sell the cargo himself. Regardless, he agreed to give his "best assistance to promote the Sale." He echoed the same the following day to Richard Oswald. Thus, Laurens seemed to place a greater priority upon the commercial interests of his associates than upon his own humanitarian concerns.[33]

Commercial interests, indeed, played heavy in Laurens' decisions concerning slave trading. While he considered the fortunes of his business associates above those of the

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[32]Laurens to John Rutherford, 4 April 1763, Laurens to John Knight, 22 December 1763, Laurens to John & Thomas Tipping, 15 March 1764, Laurens to George Appleby, 18 October 1764, and Laurens to Abraham Parsons, 9 November 1764, "Appendix to the Extracts from the Proceedings of the High Court of Vice-Admiralty in Charles Town, South Carolina, &c, 3 August 1768, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 403, IV, 96-97, 214, 478-479, and 499, VII, 99-100.

[33]Laurens to Edward Martin, 10 June 1764, Laurens to John Knight, 14 February 1763, Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 15 February 1763, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 303-304, III, 253, 259-260.

Africans, he similarly placed a higher priority on the financial security of his family. He related in the fall of 1764 that he had "contracted his sphere" concerning the slave trade, "unless some maladventures shall render it necessary for the good of my Family to bustle in commerce again & in such an event it will be my duty to bestir myself." He continued to equivocate on the issue for a number of years, for in 1772, he wrote his brother James that "I was going to engage him [a Mr. Waring] in the Sale of more than one African Cargo, but now I am at a Loss, whether I should be right in doing so." Thus, several years after relinquishing the trade, Laurens still had not comfortably resolved the issue. He did, in fact, have humanitarian impulses about the trading of slaves, as he was faced with an ethical dilemma as whether to follow his conscience or his pocketbook. While his heart may have wrestled with the ethical question, his head could never completely ignore the more immediate financial considerations.[34]

Laurens' letters emphasized the hazards of a business whose gambles included the loss of ships at sea, the uncertainties of supply, the ravages of epidemics among the slaves, the outbreak of war, the activities of privateers, and the fall of crop prices leading to the fall of slave prices. Further, if other ships arrived on the coast when one

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[34]Laurens to Ross & Mill, 1 September 1764, Laurens to James Laurens, 1 January 1772, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 393, VIII, 149.

venture's ship was trading, the price of slaves would be bid up, or if some standard price for slaves was being used, it would be necessary to remain longer to complete a cargo. On these occasions he was forced to send some of his slaves "into the Country," and sold them off gradually after they were "a little Seasoned." Laurens expressed frustration at this inconvenience. The longer the period of stay for a ship, the higher the cost of the venture. So while the slave trade was highly profitable, the risks involved also made it highly speculative. In 1755 the Emperor, a ship carrying nearly 270 slaves consigned to Laurens, was unable to put in at Charleston because of a storm and instead put in at Jamaica where she sold her slaves. The loss amounted to L3,000 sterling. Laurens concluded: "The African trade is more liable to such Accidents than any other we know of so it highly concerns such as becomes adventurers in that branch to fortify themselves against every disappointment that the trade is Incident to." These risks, however unpalatable for Laurens, were in themselves mere nuisances, for profits were still to be had. However, when combined with other external and personal influences by the 1760s, they prompted withdrawal from slaving. Laurens, in fact, claimed to have lost considerable money between 1764 and 1769, precisely coinciding with his withdrawal from the slave trade.[35]

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[35]James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 10; Simon Rottenberg, "The Business of Slave Trading," 421; Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Slave Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-

The price of slaves was also influenced by the value of the current crops of rice and indigo. Whereas 1755 had seen a bumper indigo crop and therefore an increased demand for new slaves, Laurens wrote Gidney Clarke at the beginning of 1756 that planters were becoming "very slack all at once in buying of Slaves" because produce was selling poorly and was likely to get worse. He repeated similar concerns that month to John Knight and to Law, Satterthwaite, and Jones, and wrote Thomas Easton and Company that planters were buying fewer slaves during the past two months because "the Price of their Produce" had fallen. In August 1756, Laurens wrote the merchant Jonathan Blundell that the declaration of war along with a severe drought that damaged the indigo crop discouraged the buying of slaves and reduced prices by "at least 10 per Cent." By February 1757, due to better crops of indigo and rice, Laurens anticipated a greater demand for slaves in the spring. Laurens shared these risks of slaving by always acting in partnership. Moreover, in its early years the firm of Austin and Laurens enjoyed the cooperation of the wealthy merchant Gabriel Manigault in some of its business ventures. When Laurens lost his business partners, the additional risks

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1771," 194; Laurens echoed similar sentiments to Gidney Clark when he stated that "Finding we could not sell the last of your Negroes in Town at any tolerable price being so much reduced . . . we sent nine of them" to the "Country" for future sales. Laurens to Gidney Clarke, 3 March 1756, Laurens to Clarke, 9 November 1762, Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 16 December 1762, Laurens to Henry Bright & Co., 2 June 1769, and Laurens to Wells, Wharton, & Doran, 27 May 1755, Laurens to Ross and Mill, 3 January 1775, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 123-124, III, 149, 194-195, VI, 585, I, 258-259, X, 10.

combined to become too great for a single businessman.[36]

Other speculative concerns also bothered Laurens. He wrote Gidney Clark in 1762 that there was great demand for slaves, "but at present we have no Exchange for our paper Currency." Later in the year he notified Richard Oswald about the difficulty of getting remittances and noted that "Bills are very scarce." In addition to the occasional scarcity of hard currency, another risk that concerned Laurens in at least small measure was Teredo, the shipworm, which was especially bothersome to slave ships. The worm ate through the wooden hulls and encrusted them with growths of weed and small mollusks. When attacked by the worms, ships became fouled, slow, difficult to maneuver, and costly to operate. John Knight and Company of Liverpool learned from Laurens in 1775 that the sloops of their slaver, the Enterprise, were "eaten through with the worm." Laurens later recorded that the worm had taken possession of the "American Brig & it is now condemned." The Teredo increased maintenance costs of ships, delayed voyages, increased overall expenses, potentially increased mortality on the Middle Passage, and increased the likelihood of ships falling prey to pirates and wartime enemies. While the worm by itself may have posed a minor

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[36]Laurens to Samuel Linnecan, 8 May 1756, Laurens to Gidney Clarke, 1 January 1756, Laurens to John Knight, 3 January 1756, Laurens to Law, Satterthwaite, & Jones, 12 January 1756, Laurens to Thomas Easton & Co., 17 January 1756, Laurens to Smith & Clifton, 1 November 1755, Laurens to Jonathan Blundell & Co., 16 August 1756, and Laurens to Thomas Frankland, 11 February 1757, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 178, 57, 59, 65, 71, 1, 287 and 448; James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 10-11.

risk, added to his other financial hazards, it certainly gave Laurens concern.[37]

Probably a more significant risk that burdened Laurens was the difficulty in dealing with human cargoes. To avoid loss caused by a sudden change in weather, the slave trade was largely a seasonal affair, with slaves typically arriving in port from late spring until early fall. At other times, slaves had to be furnished with additional clothing, entailing extra expense as well as increased chances of mortality. These additional considerations had to be weighed against adverse market conditions in the West Indies. Besides, prices paid for slaves were generally lower in winter than in spring or summer because they could not be put to immediate use.[38]

Disease was of paramount concern to Laurens, as it too impacted on his commercial venture. In the spring of 1755 he remarked that "two Guinea Vessells now in port & both under Quarentine for the small Pox, so they wont be allow'd to sell in less than a month or two." Small pox was ubiquitous, as was the quarantining of slaving vessels. In 1756 Laurens noted that with four cargoes "now under Quarantine," slave prices would be reduced considerably. Similar frustrations were reported by Laurens on numerous occasions. In 1773,

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[37]Laurens to Gidney Clark, 9 November 1762 and Laurens to Richard Oswald & Co., 16 December 1762, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 149, 194-195; James A. Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 256.

[38]Daniel C. Littlefield, "The Slave Trade to Colonial South Carolina: A Profile," South Carolina Historical Magazine 91 (April 1990), 95.

after he had retired from slave trading, Laurens wrote his brother James of newly imported Africans spreading "Contagious Distempers which alone are very dreadful" to the Charleston population, black and white. Earlier he had expressed anxiety over a "Parapneumonia breaking out in many parts of the Province and sweeping off great numbers of Negroes," which he contended would impede slave sales.[39]

As risky and speculative as the slave trade might be, the potential for profits was high. Although Henry Laurens was reluctant to continue in this precarious, albeit profitable business without the assistance of partners, socio-political concerns also prompted him to relinquish the trading of Africans. Louis B. Wright asserted that few whites in eighteenth-century South Carolina were concerned about the moral wrong of treating human beings as commodities (though he was not specifically commenting on Laurens), but many white South Carolinians worried constantly about the growing imbalance between the black and white population and the increasing possibility of slave insurrections. Since the first mingling of the two peoples at Jamestown, whites had feared that their power would be usurped by the blacks and

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[39]Laurens to Smith & Clifton, 26 May 1755, Laurens to Henry Bright, 23 August 1756, Laurens to William Whaley, 22 May 1755, Laurens to James Laurens, 11 March 1773, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 255, II, 294, I, 250, VIII, 608; Laurens to Gadney Clarke, cited in Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 168. David Brion Davis briefly mentions Laurens' confession of the risks involved with the slave trade in The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 136-137.

destroy the agricultural system of the South. South Carolina rapidly developed a black majority in the eighteenth century. Historian Peter Wood noted that blacks outnumbered whites in South Carolina by about 1712, and a 1720 census placed the slave population at 11,828 as opposed to a white total of 8,000. Colonial Governor James Glen recorded 39,000 blacks and only 25,000 whites in South Carolina by 1748. The number of blacks rose further with the heightened importation of Africans during the next two decades. The slave trade peaked in Charleston in 1773 when nearly 8,000 arrived in one year. In addition to his anxiety over the growing African population spreading disease along the mainland, Laurens joined his peers in expressing fear of slave insurrections. He wrote of an "account of a most horrible Insurrection intended by Negroes" in South Carolina, "which was providentially discover'd before any mischief done." This fear permeated many of his letters during his involvement in the slave trade.[40]

A contemporary of Laurens in South Carolina was Doctor George Milligen-Johnston, who established that there were "about Seventy Thousand" black slaves in South Carolina in 1763. He argued that they were necessary "in the climate," but "very dangerous Domestics, their Numbers so much exceeding

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[40]Louis B. Wright, South Carolina: A Bicentennial History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 106; W. Robert Higgins, "The Ambivalence of Freedom: Whites, Blacks, and the Coming of the American Revolution," in The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership ed. W. Robert Higgins, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 45; Wood, Black Majority, 146; David D. Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 20; Laurens to James Cowles, 21 March 1749, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 229.

the Whites." In 1769 Laurens warned slave merchant Hinson Todd to "be very careful to guard against insurrection. Never put your life in their power a moment." Several years later, in the summer of 1775, some local slaves had been holding nighttime meetings "under the guise," Laurens proclaimed, "of religion." Laurens feared reports that these slaves "were exciting & endeavoring to bring abt. a General Insurrection." During the same summer Laurens recorded that trials of several slaves suspected of plotting insurrections had taken place. Laurens was terribly concerned about potential insurrections and displayed a concomitant apprehension over the increasing majority held by the blacks.[41]

Laurens had additional fears of increasing slave numbers besides his apprehension over insurrections. He desired a reduction in the gap between rich and poor whites at the expense of slavery, and had written as early as 1763 that he "wished that our economy and government differ'd from the present system," which was based on slavery. He began to oppose slavery itself, partially because it kept out white settlers and created an economic and social system characterized by "a glare of precarious riches . . . the possession of individuals" rather than "the riches of the

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[41]Chapman J. Milling, ed., Colonial South Carolina: Two Contemporary Descriptions By Governor James Glen and Doctor George Milligen-Johnston (London, 1761/1763; reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951), 135-136; Laurens to Hinson Todd, 14 April 1769, Laurens to Thomas Hutchinson, 5 July 1775, Laurens to John Laurens, 20 June 1775, Papers of Henry Laurens, VI, 438, X, 206, 184.

State . . . greater and more permanent." Years later, while in England in 1783, Laurens wrote William Drayton that "Future grants of land will in a considerable degree depend upon future importation of Negroes in the southern States." He continued that "Should the future importation be prohibited or greatly restricted, the land already granted will be parceled out to poor white adventurers." He then added that "mechanics will find full employment and good wages, and husbandmen may obtain land upon much better terms than they have been accustomed to." In November of the same year he wrote his daughter, Mary, that it was unfortunate that South Carolinians were still so intent on importing slaves. He argued that if continued, this importation would "keep them [the South Carolinians] a weak defenceless People, & may one day prove the destruction of the Sea Coast Inhabitants." He also felt, by 1785, that nothing could recover "the credit of this Country or save it from total ruin, but a prohibition of the importation of Negroes." Later in 1785, he asserted that the nation was already "overwhelmed with debt," and would "sink deeper & deeper by excessive importations." Laurens did not withdraw from the slave trade predominantly because of heartfelt concern for the plight of the blacks. Instead, he did so largely because of the economic constraints that slavery placed on Carolina society. By the early 1760s, his personal economic philosophy began to influence his views toward slavery. Two decades later, Laurens was more adamant

that slavery would lead to the economic demise of South Carolina. How much influence this actually wielded in forcing Laurens out of the trade during the 1760s is speculative, but it is apparent that he was certainly beginning to question the importation during this earlier period.[42]

Still other socio-political factors played a role in Laurens' decision to terminate the slave business. Immediately after he lost his business partners in August 1762, he began to abandon the slave trade. Two years later, as he contemplated the finality of this decision, he wrote to John Knight concerning a bill before both houses of the colonial assembly which would impose an additional duty of L100 on each imported slave. This bill, in effect a prohibitive ban on the slave trade, was to be temporary and was proposed to take place for three years beginning January 1, 1766. Laurens voted in favor of postponing the reading of this bill, but he was overruled; it was passed on August 25, 1764. Therefore, the importation of slaves into Charleston was effectively cut off between January 1, 1766 and January 1, 1769. Why had Laurens, who had expressed regret over the social and economic problems associated with slavery, and who had already begun to disassociate himself from direct

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[42]Laurens, cited in David D. Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 453-455; Laurens to William Drayton, 23 February 1783, cited in Wallace, 454-455; Laurens to James Bourdieu, 6 May 1785, Doc. No. 85-0XX, The Laurens Collection, Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2; Laurens to Mary Laurens, November 27, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection, 2-3; Laurens to James Bourdieu, June 9, 1785, Doc. No. 85-0XX, The Laurens Collection, 2.

importation of slaves on, supposedly, moral principles, voted against this bill? Perhaps Laurens was not resolute in his feelings concerning this slaving practice. At any rate, as he equivocated on the issue of importation, the decision was made for him by the South Carolina Assembly, albeit temporarily.[43]

Although Laurens had largely withdrawn from the slave trade prior to the passing of the "Duty Act," he had not fully resolved his decision to proceed in that direction. He continued to advise other merchants after his own retirement. Even during the ban on imports, he wrote in 1767 that when the "African trade" opened up again in January 1769, he would give Henry Bright "timely advice." In May 1768, Laurens revealed to Thomas and Richard Millerson that, once the trade re-opened, he had "not resolved upon the Subject in my own mind whether ever to enter upon that Trade again or not, but be that as it may," he added, "if you shall think my Services acceptable I shall be ready to give the Masters of your vessels the best advice in my Power whenever they shall call for it." Furthermore, during the ban slave cargoes came to Savannah with its less restrictive duty, whereby Laurens kept his coals in the fire by selling Savannah slaves on consignment. He wrote Smith and Baillies in 1767 that their slave cargo could not be sold in South Carolina "under a duty less than L110 per head." Laurens agreed to send them himself

[43]Laurens to John Knight, 24 August 1764, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 381-383; Editors note, Papers of Henry Laurens, V, 75.

to a Georgia port, which he had done before, selling "at different times above an hundred Negroes there on my own Account without loss or damage." These remarks indicate that Laurens was still quite interested in slave trading, in spite of the legal constraints that had to be manipulated.[44]

On May 22, 1770, soon after the difficult delivery of a baby daughter, Laurens' wife of twenty years, Eleanor, died. The broken-hearted Laurens, normally reluctant to reveal emotion, poured out his grief in a letter to a friend that he had suffered two months of "painful Anxiety . . . from the fatal Blow which took from me, a faithful bosom Friend, a Friend and dear Companion . . . [taken] from my Children, a Mother . . . . A Blow which staggr'd me almost to the Gates of Death, the Weight of which still lays heavily on me." He continued that his children now had "Demands upon me." Laurens immediately curtailed his business activities and became father, mother, nurse, and tutor to his surviving children. Arranging for the care of his daughters, he took the boys to England for their education in 1771. Plans had previously been made for his sons to be educated in England, but with the death of Eleanor, Henry decided to accompany them. He wrote a friend, John Palson, in late 1770 that the care of his children and of their education "engrosses the

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[44]Laurens to Henry Bright, 11 December 1767, Laurens to Thomas & Richard Millerson & Co., 25 May 1768, Laurens to John Doran, 24 December 1767, and Laurens to Smith & Baillies, 22 October 1767, Papers of Henry Laurens, V, 498-499, 697, 531, and 375.

chief Part of my time."[45]

Laurens was absent from South Carolina for thirty-nine months. As early as December 1764 he had announced plans to accompany his son John to England, and was thus "determined to decline all Foreign consignments." But Laurens remained in South Carolina for another seven years, until his wife's death. By this time he had amassed a great fortune, and thereby was financially able to give up business and devote his time to his children. Though the three-year prohibition of the slave trade due to excessive duties had ended on December 31, 1768, a non-importation agreement went into effect for six months in late 1769, prolonging further Laurens' ability to re-enter the slave trade. Soon after this agreement was lifted, Laurens left for Europe, leaving him unable to carry out effectively the commercial activities that had occupied his life in Charleston. Thus, while it has been argued that Laurens initially left off the trading of slaves and did not re-enter after its re-opening in 1769 because of humanitarian concerns, it is apparent that other circumstances interfered with his business practices. Even David Ramsay admitted that Laurens retired from business after losing his wife and "having amassed a fortune" so as to devote his energies to the education of his sons and then to American

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[45]Lillian Belk Youell, "Henry Laurens: The Neglected Negotiator," 708; Laurens to James Habersham, 1 October 1770, Papers of Henry Laurens, VII, 374-375; Townsend, An American Soldier, 21-22; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, II, 261.

political concerns.[46]

Laurens also had other, more personal reasons for giving up trading human cargo. He was influenced, at times heavily, by his family. His father, John Laurens, the son of French Huguenot immigrants, had worked hard to rise out of less-than-comfortable circumstances to become a prosperous Charleston saddler. By his death in 1747 at the age of 51, the elder Laurens had acquired three slaves. However, he apparently had expressed misgivings about the vast importation of slaves into South Carolina. These reservations were passed on to his son James, Henry's brother, who refused to enter the slave trade despite offers from Henry. By the 1770s Henry Laurens' own son, John, had developed rather radical political and social views, which he frequently espoused in letters to and conversations with his father. John has been described by Laura Frech as "not only a radical republican, but a levelling democrat." Part of this radical republicanism was expressed in a vocal denouncement of slavery. Letters to his father began to decry slavery by the middle of the 1770s, when he was still a young man, and John tried hard to convince his father and others to enlist a "Black Battalion" of slaves to help fight in the American Revolution. In August 1776, Henry responded in a now-famous letter to his son: "You know, my dear son, I abhor slavery." He continued that he had found

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[46]Laurens to Cowles & Harford, 22 December 1764, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 553.

the Christian religion and slavery "growing under the same authority . . . . I nevertheless dislike it." He cited his plans to manumit his own slaves, but first hoped to "receive your advice and assistance in this affair in good time." Thus, while Henry Laurens expressed concern over slavery and the slave trade, which he had relinquished by this time, he was still strongly influenced by his son John. When the trade reopened in South Carolina in 1769, Laurens had not re-entered it. As the 1770s arrived, Laurens, for several years, contemplated engaging in the African trade once again, but ultimately refrained. This was the period in which John was entering maturity and appeared to influence his father in no small measure. The relentless pressure that Laurens began to feel from both brother James and son John played a role in this eighteenth-century drama that saw Henry Laurens retreat from the slave trade.[47]

In the course of the eighteenth century it became common for both British and American merchants to extend their range well beyond exchange per se and the provision of commercial and financial services, increasingly involving themselves in such activities as land promotion and development of plantation agriculture. Henry Laurens was no exception. By the mid 1760s he was as much a planter and land speculator as he was a merchant. By 1763 he already owned Wanbaw and Mepkin

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[47]Laura Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," 72; Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 446; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, II, 26.

plantations, which were managed by his brother-in-law John Ball. Ball's death in 1764 forced Laurens to take up the role of planter more seriously. Although he was reducing his role as a merchant, he did not divorce himself completely from commerce. He did turn some of his business over to Brewton & Smith, and most of his patronage to the new firm of Price, Hest, & Head, which was composed of his former clerks -- William Price, William Hest, and Edmund Head.[48]

By 1769 Laurens was able to write that he had "wholly retired from that branch of Trade [the slave trade] & am endeavoring to draw all my commercial concerns within a very narrow compass." By now Laurens had moved to his Mepkin plantation outside of Charleston, and was no longer physically located in the center of Charleston commercial activity. He revealed to the firm of Oswald, Grant & Co., in the summer of 1769, that "My present plan of business renders me incapable to selling Negroes to such advantage as I used to do." Laurens added that he lived "a little remote from town, am very often in the Country, & by an inattention to mercantile affairs for some Years past have lost a great many of my old Country acquaintances," and concluded, "but besides these impediments I am endeavoring to go to England some time in

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[48]Peter A. Coclanis, "The Hydra Head of Merchant Capital: Markets and Merchants in Early South Carolina." In The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr., edited by David R. Chesnutt and Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 7; Helen Henning, Great South Carolinians, 69; George C. Rogers, ed., "Introduction," Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, xvii-xviii.

next Month & shall do so if I possibly can put my affairs in order to admit of my absence." Laurens, then, made a transition during the last half of the 1760s from merchant to planter. He had left the commercial hub of Charleston and moved to his Mepkin plantation, concentrating now on his role as slaveholder rather than slave merchant. Though later expressing abhorrence of the institution of slavery, Laurens saw his personal ownership of slaves as markedly different from the slave trade. He believed that he could largely ensure that his own slaves were well cared for. Indeed, Ramsay, Wallace, and a catalog of other historians have long emphasized Laurens' kind treatment of his slaves. Regardless of Laurens' position as a slaveholder, however, it is apparent that he retired from slave trading at precisely the point that he relinquished virtually *all* commercial activities. The slave trade was merely one aspect of his mercantile ventures: no longer a merchant, Laurens was, therefore no longer a slave merchant.[49]

By 1770, when he was forty-six years of age, Laurens had made enough money to completely retire from the slave, rice, rum, and deerskin trade to devote most all of his energies not

[49]Laurens retired from mercantile activities during the course of the 1760s and never re-entered commerce. The 1770s and early 1780s saw him managing his plantations and becoming increasingly active in the American revolutionary movement. Afterwards, he wrote, in 1786, that "my Residence is now almost wholly at this place [Mepkin] entirely retired from Commerce." Laurens to Richard Millerson, 3 June 1769, Laurens to Oswald, Grant & Co., 14 June 1769, Papers of Henry Laurens, VI, 587, 589-90; Laurens to Robert Aislabie, May 24, 1786, Doc. No. 86-XXX, The Laurens Collection, 1.

spent on his family to planting. Although he claimed to have lost substantial sums of money between 1764 and 1769, he was still one of the wealthiest men in the Carolina Lowcountry. Historian Laura Frech estimated Laurens' assets, consisting of about 14,000 acres of land in eight plantations, several hundred slaves, South Carolina produce, and bank deposits in England, to be worth upwards of L43,000 sterling, the equivalent of perhaps several million dollars today. George C. Rogers estimated Laurens' worth to be about L30,000 sterling when he sailed for London in 1771. Laurens' statement that, "although I claim not to be in the highest I am a good way from the lowest Circle," was overly modest. In spite of the American Revolution that was soon to follow, Laurens continued to add to his holdings during the remainder of his life.[50]

Immediately upon his return from Europe in December 1774, Laurens assumed the role of planter once again, including visits to his various plantations. Managing his plantations took virtually all of his time and efforts, leaving him unable -- and unwilling -- to engage in commercial ventures. A single visit to his Georgia Altamaha plantations "engaged me Six Weeks," he recalled. When asked in 1774 to join long-time associate John Lewis Gervais in a trading partnership, Laurens

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[50]Laura P. Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," 69; George C. Rogers, Jr., "The Laurens Papers -- Halfway," The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association, ed. James O. Farmer, Jr. (1977), 41; Laurens to Ross & Mill, 3 January 1775, Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 10.

responded that he was "growing old, not capable of such duty as formerly." Laurens reiterated that he had retired from all mercantile endeavors; he wrote that he had relinquished the commissions from the exports of rice and indigo "to persons who would do the whole effectively." He soon added that he could not "attend personally to Mercantile affairs with the diligence which alone should entitle a Factor to his Commission_ unwilling therefore to do Your business by halves, I have transferred the whole . . . to a Younger Man & who of course has more time upon his hands." It is obvious that Laurens relinquished not only 'morally objectionable' slave trading, but had retired from mercantilistic ventures *in toto*. The transformation was now complete: Henry Laurens saw himself no longer as a merchant but as a planter.[51]

The years 1773-1774 marked a great divide in the career of Laurens. While in Europe, he began to articulate his political philosophy more openly. Afterwards, with the advent of the American Revolution, he took an active public and political stance and was at the forefront of the revolutionary movement in South Carolina. On January 11, 1775, soon after his return to Charleston following his thirty-nine months in Europe, Laurens was chosen to participate in the South Carolina provincial Congress. From there he became

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[51]Laurens to James Laurens, 24 June 1775, Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 22 September 1774, Laurens to Joseph Nicholson, 6 February 1775, Laurens to Richard Nicholson, 6 February 1775, Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 197, IX, 570, X, 61, 66.

increasingly involved in public life. He was elected president of the South Carolina Council of Safety on June 16, 1775, and was re-elected in November. Also active in various charitable and educational organizations, Laurens continued to serve in the Commons House of Assembly and its successor, the Provincial Congress, from 1775 until March 1776. At this time, he was elected a member of the Legislative Council and vice-president of South Carolina under her temporary constitution, which he helped write.[52]

With his election as a member of South Carolina's delegation to the Continental Congress in 1777, Laurens moved from the state to the national scene. It was soon afterwards that John Adams, in a letter to his wife Abigail, recognized the outstanding abilities of the South Carolina leader. On November 1, 1771, Laurens was elected President of the Second Continental Congress, serving until his resignation in December 1778. The following year he was appointed minister plenipotentiary from the United States to Holland. Laurens sailed for Holland in 1780 to negotiate a treaty of peace and commerce as well as a loan. Seized by the British while at sea along with his papers, he was charged with high treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Laurens remained in the tower for nearly fifteen months. Finally, on the last day of 1781 he was released on heavy bail. Soon after his release

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[52]Laura Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," 69-70; Philip M. Hamer, ed., "Introduction," Papers of Henry Laurens, I, xvii.

he received a commission from Congress to be one of four ministers to negotiate a peace with Great Britain. He traveled to Paris, and there, along with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay, signed the preliminaries of peace on November 30, 1782. Laurens returned to America in 1784 and reached Charleston early in the following year.[53]

While serving in various public positions, Laurens found little time to engage in commercial activities. Already by October 1775 he wrote Arthur George Karr: "that presidency [of the Council of Safety] which you speak of, has employed my Days & of times whole Nights to the great disorder & detriment of all my own affairs." Laurens became even busier in affairs public as the War for Independence proceeded. With patriotic zeal he attacked his public duties in much the same manner that he had done as a merchant and planter. Laurens had amassed his personal fortune and now felt bound to help the embryonic nation secure its political fortune. He did not engage in the African trade during the Revolution because of these more pressing concerns. Returning to the trade was no longer a matter of choice. Besides, Charleston came under British occupation during the war, and importation was cut off from 1780 until 1783, much as it had been intermittently by Congress during the previous decade.[54]

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[53]Philip M. Hamer, ed., "Introduction," Papers of Henry Laurens, I, xx-xxi; David Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 263-264.

[54]Laurens to Arthur George Karr, 21 October 1775, Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 487; James A. Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 414.

Following the Revolution, Laurens recommended Carolina firms to English slaving friends, but did not resume mercantile life. He retired from all public business to his Mepkin plantation, raising rice and indigo, amusing himself with agricultural experiments, and spending time with his family on his 3,000 acre estate. He was now an old man, in poor health (he had long suffered from gout, among other illnesses, which grew worse during his confinement in London), and had no interest nor ability to return to the active commercial ventures which so preoccupied him in his younger days. Both the war -- and the post-war -- years saw Laurens no longer engaged in slave trading, yet humanitarian considerations played little, if any, role in this decision.[55]

Though Laurens assigned many reasons for giving up the slave traffic, he never suggested it had been unprofitable. Despite the speculative nature of the trade, replete with hazards, Laurens amassed a substantial portion of his fortune in selling Africans. Just how lucrative his part in the trade was is difficult to determine; it is doubtful if he and his partners would have remained factors for eleven years had it not been a profitable venture. While in England in 1772, he wrote his brother James, to whom he had earlier offered his slave business: "I have already refused the Offers (unask'd by me) and without Security, of Negro Cargoes from three

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[55]Rawley, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 414; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 264.

Houses . . . . but these Branches, the most profitable, I have quitted to people who are more eager for them. You know that I have given up many Thousands of pounds," Laurens emphatically announced, "which I might have added to my Stock in that way." Perhaps it is impossible to determine how much of Laurens' immense wealth sprang up from the African trade, how much from his other mercantile operations, and how much from his land speculations. But of the various branches of business in which he engaged, slaving, Laurens testified, was "the most profitable."[56]

The profits arising from trafficking slaves created an ethical dilemma for Laurens. While his motives for giving up the trade were mixed and his statements inconsistent, his conduct contradicted his professional benevolence. After initially relinquishing his role as a slave merchant, he persistently attended to placing consignments for English firms, collecting commissions for his services. The trading of slaves seemed to be perfectly acceptable to Laurens -- if handled by his approved list of friends and if he personally dealt with only small numbers on consignment. Until his political life overwhelmed any possibility of dealing in slaves either directly or indirectly, Laurens kept abreast of

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[56]Laurens frequently corresponded as such: "everything continuing to sell low except Slaves." While he experienced downturns in the demand for and prices of slaves, Laurens generally found this speculative venture handsomely profitable. Laurens to Devonsheir, Reeve, & Lloyd, 20 August 1755, Papers of Henry Laurens, I, 322; Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 11; Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 1747-1771," 195; Laurens to James Laurens, 6 February 1772, Papers of Henry Laurens, VIII, 177-178.

the market for slaves, constantly ensuring that his friends and business associates reaped the greatest financial rewards possible. His friendship with old customers and the infection of business were apparently stronger than any moral conviction. As late as the spring of 1774 Laurens was still advising young merchants, and apparently still having second thoughts about his withdrawal from trading slaves. He wrote John Lewis Gervais that if he "had any desire to enter largely in to Trade again I would readily consent to join you in a House." After the distractions of the Revolution were over, Laurens once again advised other merchants on the details of the slave trade. In 1783 he warned a merchant who had "applied to me to recommend some proper person in Charles Town to who he might consign cargoes of Negroes," that he no longer agreed with the importation of blacks into the United States, and hoped that the trade would be prohibited in South Carolina. Yet following his admonishment, Laurens "gave him the names of several of my old acquaintances." In the spring of 1786 he commented twice to the firm of Bourdieu, Chollet & Bourdieu that "Refraining from Engagements for the Cargoes of African Ships, will do you no Injury, at least until our Credit shall revive, it is wholly lost at present." Laurens, then, continued to remain involved, albeit indirectly, with the importation of African slaves into the United States

whenever he was not distracted by more pressing concerns.[57]

Henry Laurens had entered the life of the merchant at full speed. He was actively involved in a plethora of commercial ventures, with slave trading being the most profitable. Yet, as Laurens grew older, he began to develop new and different interests. Perhaps his mercantile career no longer brought the same challenge that it once had; perhaps he became more involved in planting because of the social pressures exerted upon the Lowcountry elite of the day. At any rate, he gradually moved out of the mainstream of the "African business" and into the periphery as a consultant as he devoted his energies first to planting, then to planting and his family, later to political priorities, and finally, back again to planting. Laurens was an intense man deeply devoted to family, religion, public service, and career and their conflicting demands. He displayed at least some sincerity when he declared his withdrawal from trading Africans because of the poor treatment that they might obtain from future masters. He was faced with an ethical dilemma

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[57]Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," 14; Moore, "Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century," 191; Laurens to Joseph Brown, 14 April 1764, to Thomas Hartley & Son, 9 May 1764, to Daniel Howard, 11 June 1764, to Richard Oswald, 10 August 1764, to James Smith, 1 March 1764, to Richard Oswald, 24 May 1768, to Henry Bright, 25 August 1768, to Ross & Mill, 11 March 1769, to John Knight, 23 October 1769, to Ross & Mill, 31 October 1770, to John Holman, 8 September 1770, to William Cowles & Co., 29 May 1771, to Felix Warley, 3 February 1772, to John Lewis Gervais, 5 February and 2 March 1774, and to John Knight, 17 March 1774, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 246, 277, 305-306, 362, 195, V, 694, VI, 81, 407, VII, 172, 393, 344, 503, VIII, 169, IX, 263, 325, 360; Laurens to Felix Warley, 11 August 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection, 1; Laurens to Bourdieu, Chollet and Bourdieu, 28 February and 29 April 1786, Doc. Nos. 86-XXX-1, 86-XXX-2, The Laurens Collection, 1, 2.

that he was unable to easily resolve. More important, however, to Laurens' decision to withdraw from the slave trade were external factors, both commercial and socio-political. These factors included the interruption and disturbance of the trade by the Seven Years' and Revolutionary Wars, Laurens' loss of business partners, the ban on slave imports into South Carolina, his ever-growing wariness of an increasing black majority which upset both the social and economic balance of South Carolina, and the abundance of financial risks associated with the slave trade. Additional factors reflected personal choices made by Laurens that contributed to his removal from the slave trade: his absence from America to secure education for his sons in Europe and his imprisonment in London, his transformation from merchant to full-time planter, and, finally, the growing importance of his political career. Laurens did not give up dealing in human cargo merely because of a guilty conscience.

Gradually, Laurens more keenly questioned the slave trade -- and the institution of slavery itself. As a young merchant in the 1740s and 50s, the accumulation of wealth was of paramount concern, while humanitarian and social concerns, or broad economic consequences, were of little concern to Laurens. By 1762 he had begun to question the morality of the slave trade. As the decade passed, his ethical dilemma grew. By 1769 he had completely withdrawn from the importation of slaves. As we have seen, however, a number of more pressing

issues more significantly facilitated Laurens' ultimate withdrawal and his later decision not to return to the trade. In his old age, a retired Laurens reflected that religious, humanitarian motives had been prominent in his decision. Laurens' recollection of the past was clouded, perhaps even haunted, by motives that *should* have been.

Laurens was one of Charleston's greatest slave merchants. The slave trade was the vehicle which facilitated his great wealth and prestige. Much of his personal wealth and the options it allowed were based on his profits from the slave business. Frederic Bancroft asserted in 1931 that Laurens enriched himself through the slave trade, became a great planter, and "theoretically an emancipationist, without liberating any [slaves] 'except a few individuals.'" Bancroft further remarked that "tradition left out the 'Guinea business' and embalmed Laurens as an antislavery man." Laurens remains embalmed as such. While Laurens relinquished the trading of African slaves and privately denounced the evils of slavery, he does not deserve a place on a pedestal. The tangible reasons why Henry Laurens retired from the slave trade have too long been ignored.[58]

Except in volume of his business as a slave merchant, Laurens' experiences were probably not much different from

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[58]Frederic Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South (New York, 1931), 3; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 8; Rogers,, "A Tribute to Henry Laurens," 1.

those of other Charleston factors. He did remove himself from this activity, yet his failure to take a public stance on the issue negated any positive effect Laurens might have had on his fellow planter-merchant elite. Though opposed to the economic and social systems perpetuated by the slave trade, Laurens refused to threaten the *status quo*. His personal motivations never became public. His actions -- and later his silence -- played a major role in spreading the peculiar institution throughout the southern colonies.

## CHAPTER II

## "A LOVER OF FREEDOM:" A SLAVEHOLDER CONVICTED?

In the South Carolina Lowcountry a merchant-planter elite had emerged by the eighteenth century. This aristocracy was almost wholly dependent upon slave labor for the accumulation of their vast wealth, which in turn, greatly influenced their social development into the antebellum period and beyond. Henry Laurens, in addition to being a prominent merchant and dealer of African slaves, was also a prosperous planter and landowner. By the American Revolution he was perhaps the most prominent of the South Carolina merchant-planter elite, and soon emerged as a respected political leader. The role in which Laurens assumed as a Lowcountry slaveholder is an important one, as is his impact on other elite.

Laurens is thought by many historians to be unique among these Low Country elite. Not only is he remembered by South Carolina historians for his voluntary withdrawal from the slave trade because of his humanitarian compassion for the Africans being imported, he has also been cited as a leading abolitionist, exceptional among men of his era in the Lower South. Historians have argued that Laurens was kind and humane in his treatment of his own slaves, and he is remembered for expressing views that slavery be abolished

throughout the United States, and for his good intentions of manumitting his slaves. In his role as a slaveholder was Laurens atypical of the Low Country South Carolina planter-elite of the eighteenth century? Why is he remembered in this way, and was he actually an abolitionist? Joyce Chaplin has asserted that the lack of revolutionary change in black slavery during the era of the American Revolution was nowhere more noticeable than in South Carolina and Georgia. She maintained that, of southern states, these two seemed to have the least apologetic slaveholders, and were most determined to maintain continuity with the past despite the ideological confrontations of the revolutionary era. Not only did the South Carolina Low Country planters manumit few slaves and continue to employ slave labor but also discovered new uses for it. Henry Laurens, according to South Carolina historiography, was an exception to Chaplin's model.[59]

The South Carolina Regulators wrote Laurens a letter in 1771, whereby they described him as "A Lover of Freedom . . . unbias'd by Prejudice," and in the nineteenth century David Ramsay asserted that Laurens' "treatment of his domestics was highly commendable . . . . Few laborers in any country had more of the enjoyments of life than the cultivators of his grounds." David D. Wallace upped the ante and argued that not only was Laurens kind in his treatment of his slaves but was

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[59]Joyce E. Chaplin, "Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815," William and Mary Quarterly, 29.

also vehemently anti-slavery. He claimed that the "persistence of the anti-slavery sentiment in the Laurens family was remarkable and can only be accounted for by an inborn instinct of fairness and liberty." Henry, in particular, "was a convinced abolitionist and sorted constantly with men of that principle." Wallace maintained that Laurens' attitude toward slavery underwent a gradual but steady change which transformed him from the enthusiastic importer of Africans in the 1750s to the advocate of universal emancipation in 1776. Philip Hamer more recently argued that, although a trader in slaves as a young man, Laurens was moved by the spirit of liberty in the land and was probably "the first man in the Lower South to express his abhorrence of the institution of slavery." Historians William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill wrote in 1991 that "the Henry Laurens family carried the antislavery banner in South Carolina." Likewise Winthrop Jordan asserted that Laurens was "virtually alone among South Carolinians in expressing hope for the eventual disappearance of the institution to which the state was so thoroughly committed." Others also wrote of Laurens' distaste for slavery, which he had come to regard as evil. Perhaps Laurens was the most *prominent* South Carolinian to denounce slavery as early as the 1770s, but to argue that he was the first and only one to do so extends beyond the

parameters of historical truth.[60]

In addition to the historiographical view of Laurens as an antislavery man, he is also known as a man of integrity, devoted to family and God, "generous and kindly withal to friend and slave alike." Professor M. C. Tyler wrote in 1897 that Laurens was "the noblest Roman of them all -- the unsurpassed embodiment of the proudest, wittiest, most efficient, and most chivalrous Americanism of his time." Son-in-law David Ramsay cited an incident whereby Laurens once persuaded a favorite slave to receive a Small pox inoculation, who, consequently died. Laurens comforted the dying slave that the slave's children would be emancipated, which apparently they were. Events such as these added to the Laurens legend as an abolitionist. Wallace argued that Laurens displayed a "life-long trait of kindness of heart [which] became more pronounced with age." He continued that "His kindness was ever ready to his slaves, the poor, the wronged . . . . Under him the harsh features of slavery were made as light as possible." Laurens himself wrote often of what he claimed was his kind treatment toward his slaves, of

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[60]"A Letter to Henry Laurens: If We could be but calmly and tenderly heard," in The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the American Revolution: The Journal and other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant, ed. Richard J. Hooker (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia by the UNC Press, 1953), 247; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 264; Wallace, Life of Henry Laurens, 445, 451-452; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 6; William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, The American South: A History, I (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1991), 302; Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865, (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), 174; Steven A. Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 67n.

how he spared the rod in his punishment, and that he could not bring himself to separate slave families. In governing his slaves he asserted that "the Lash is forbidden," and if they deserved whipping he would sell them instead. Otherwise, he proclaimed, he would never sell a slave, "nor will I ever buy another Negro, unless it shall be to gratify a good Man who may want a Wife." At times Laurens seemed haunted by inner demons which forced him to question enslavement of a group of people, and, if enslaved, that they should be treated with kindness and respect. This view of Laurens as a kind master is pervasive and no one has attempted to discredit Ramsay and Wallace, much less Laurens. This argument has been continually perpetuated, however, through a selective reading of the Laurens' letters.[61]

A primary reason often given for Laurens' disapproval of slavery was his strong Christian conviction. Ramsay wrote of Laurens attending church daily, and that he "was intimately acquainted" with the Bible. Not only was he a student of the scriptures, he insisted that his children read them regularly as well. He has since been described by historians as "a Christian gentleman," an orthodox Episcopalian who conscientiously followed the precepts of his church, an enlightened Calvinist, "a devout Christian and strict moralist," a "religious man," and an evangelical Protestant.

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[61]Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 14; Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 65; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 261.

Laurens described himself as carrying "a little mantle of Religion about me. Indeed I will not be laughed out of it. It must be the only source from whence we can hope to derive any vital warmth when the cold hand of Death is stretching forth to arrest us." Certainly Laurens was a devout Christian. It was these convictions that forced an ethical dilemma concerning the peculiar institution. It remains to be seen, however, how Laurens resolved this dilemma.[62]

More insight into the resolution of this dilemma can perhaps be gained through a letter Laurens wrote to an acquaintance and Low Country peer Jonathan Bryan. Bryan was quite self-conscious of the tension between his materialistic desires and his "most ardent wishes for an heavenly inheritance." Laurens assured Bryan that materialism and Christianity were "by no means incompatible." As "Men know they must die," they should live their lives with thoughts of the thereafter. But "it is likewise their duty to remember that they may Live & that therefore they have day to continue working in the vineyard . . . they may receive each Man his penny." The man who is "doom'd to Labour in the Planting & Watering, without hopes of reaping the Harvest" is the "most miserable of all Men." By this last admission, Laurens'

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[62]Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 261; Mrs. Martha J. Lamb, "Henry Laurens in the London Tower," Magazine of American History, XVIII (July 1887), 1; Hamer, "Henry Laurens of South Carolina," 7; Sara Bertha Townsend, An AMerican Soldier: The Life of John Laurens, 12; Laura P. Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," South Carolina Historical Magazine 76 (April 1975), 76-78; Joanna Bowen Gillespie, "1795: Martha Laurens Ramsay's 'Dark Night of the Soul,'" William and Mary Quarterly, XLVIII (Jan.-Dec. 1991), 72.

slaves were apparently the 'most miserable of all Men,' for while Laurens was able to reconcile materialism and Christianity, his materialism was gained at the expense of the enslavement of African-Americans. He was unwilling to sacrifice his wealth by following his Christian convictions and manumitting his slaves.[63]

Laurens held a rather conservative view of slavery typical of South Carolina Low Country planter-elite. He insisted that his slaves were comfortable and well taken care of. He further argued that they did not desire the hazards of freedom. His slaves were "as happy & contented as laboring people can be," and were better off than most European peasants. Laurens observed that on more than one occasion he offered freedom to a slave who refused because the slave, he argued, realized his state was not so bad. David Ramsay, heavily influenced by his father-in-law, echoed Laurens' sentiments almost precisely. They agreed that life was often more "pleasantly enjoyed" by the slave than the master. Ramsay also argued that the "political evil" of slavery was not so much the predicament in which it placed the African, "as from its demising the incitements to industry, and from its unhappy influence on the general state of society."[64]

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[63]Alan Gallay, The Formation of a Planter Elite, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 48; Laurens to Jonathan Bryan, 4 September 1767, Papers of Henry Laurens, V, 288-291.

[64]Laurens to Alexander Hamilton, April 19, 1785, Doc. No. 85-OXX, The Laurens Collection. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2; Ramsay, Ramsay's History of South Carolina, 24.

To satisfy himself that his slaves were perfectly content, Laurens constantly wrote that his "Negroes . . . have taken no advantages against" him, and that they were strongly attached to him. This attachment was supposedly demonstrated by the loyalty of the slaves in not running away, particularly during the Revolution. Most of these letters rationalizing slave contentment were written to family members who opposed slavery. To others Laurens admits on several occasions that slaves had, in fact, run away. At least eight ran away in the summer of 1777 alone. These episodes of slave resistance alone represent the antithesis of Laurens' contention that his slaves were content. Laurens' perceptions and the slaves' actions were not in harmony.[65]

Laurens, in theory, supported emancipation from the 1770s to the end of his life. He denounced the institution in private correspondence to his family and closest friends, and declared that slavery should be abolished throughout the United States. He never, however, allowed himself to publicly admit these sentiments, and never freed but a handful of his own slaves. Laurens also never believed in racial equality. Unlike his son John, who came to believe that blacks could become useful citizens if they were freed and educated, Laurens never encouraged racial equality. Rather, he felt that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and that, if

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[65]Laurens to Martha Laurens, August 17, 1776; Laurens to John Laurens, August 14 1776; John Lewis Gervais to Henry Laurens, 26 July 1777, Papers of Henry Laurens, II, 254, 223-224, 410.

freed,

> to confine them to their original Clothing will be best_ they may & ought to continue a separate people, may be subjected by special Laws, kept harmless, made useful & freed from the tyranny & arbitrary power of individuals.[66]

Historian Philip D. Morgan has argued that blacks were viable members of the urban Charleston commercial society. They dominated the fishing industry and were employed in diverse other skilled and semi-skilled occupations. By hiring themselves out, many were easily able to purchase their freedom and became self-sufficient freemen. The number of free blacks in Charleston increased from twenty-three in 1760, to 586 in 1790, and 1,024 by 1800. By the 1760s sixty-seven percent of male slaves were considered "skilled," while one-third of the female slaves fit that bill. Laurens, however, failed to comprehend reality, arguing instead that his slaves would be unable to survive under freedom.[67]

Like most whites of his time, Henry Laurens was a racist. Historians have generally either completely ignored this fact or waxed eloquently as they dodged the issue at hand. They expound upon Laurens' plans to manumit his slaves and his emancipationist ideology. Laurens, however, felt that blacks were incapable of existing under freedom, not because of the

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[66]Laurens to William Drayton, February 23, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection.

[67]Philip D. Morgan, "Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston," in Perspectives in American History, n.s., eds., Bernard Bailyn, Donald Fleming and Stephen Thernstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 200-201.

situation in which they had been placed under slavery (as his son John would argue), but because of their inherent inferiority. Since Laurens doubted that many of his slaves could survive as free men he decided that the most benevolent course would be to continue to enslave them, though acting as a humane master. To Laurens the African enslaved in America was little more than an animal, and a man dependent upon his domesticated animals for his livelihood would certainly treat his livestock well enough.[68]

Laurens' view of black slaves as being on the level of animals rather than human beings is evident by his descriptions in numerous letters. Once, upon visiting several of his plantations, he related that he "took a State of the Negroes[,] Cattle &c." On another occasion he recorded that "Negroes from Africa sold at an unheard of Average, 100 Ebo ordinary Criatures [sic]." Laurens called "Rascally Robert" an "Unhappy Wretch," yet "treated him with all the humanity which a Man for his own Sake ought to extend to every Criature [sic] in Subjection to him." In 1768 Laurens denounced the cruelty to a body of Irish indentured servants recently imported that "would make your humanity shudder." While he did withdraw from the importation of Africans, he never such language to express his dismay at comparable (or worse) cruelty. Further, Laurens likened the English practice of divorce to "our Negroes throwing away one Wife and taking

[68]Daniel J. McDonough, Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens, 473-474.

another." Time and again Laurens displayed his view of the unfavorable nature and inhumanity of the enslaved African-Americans.[69]

Laurens habitually described his slaves in derogatory, racist terms such as "wenches," "sluts," and "lazy," and exhibited the necessity of the master to exert rigid control. He corresponded that he "sent up Rinah[,] a Negro Wench big with child[,] in Mr. Broughton's Boat to keep out of the way of the Smallpox . . . . She is a sullen Slut but easily kept down if you exert your authority." He once described another slave as a "Cunning, Quarrelsome, Young fellow. You must be watchful & take him down early but dont [sic] drive him away." Commenting generally to business associate John Knight, Laurens noted that "Negroes are faithless, & Workmen exceedingly careless." To James Grant he wrote of a male house servant who "seems to have just sense enough to carry a Watering Pot & stay at home." Another slave was described as "the Laziest Rascal that ever was in my service."[70]

Consistent with Laurens' views on race was that he was a persistent, severe, and sometimes satirical critic of

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[69]Laurens to Ralph Izard, 27 March 1775, Laurens to John Tarleton, 6 March 1772, Laurens to George Appleby, 28 February 1774, Laurens to James Laurens to James Laurens, 1 April 1772, Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 87, VIII, 214, IX, 316-317, VIII, 239. See also David Duncan Wallace, South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951, 1961), 18.

[70]Laurens to James Lawrence, 7 January 1763, Laurens to James Lawrence, 1 January 1763, Laurens to John Knight, 22 December 1764, Laurens to James Grant, 22 April 1766, Laurens to Joseph Brown, 21 August 1766, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 205, 203, IV, 556, V, 108, 170-171.

miscegenation. As early as 1763 he fired a Mepkin overseer for miscegenation. He vowed to replace the overseer with a man "that has a Wife." The complaint expressed by Laurens was not one of sympathy for the violated slave but one of dismay over the interracial act itself. From London in 1774 he deplored the taste of London women in taking blacks as sexual partners. "I cannot agree with the ladies, that negroes will mend the breed of Englishmen . . . who will have a fair opportunity of determining upon the merit of the female gust about the year 1780, when from a moderate computation there will be 20,000 mulattoes in London only." A decade later he condemned the British attitude toward slavery, which he said was "similar to that of a pious, externally pious Man's prohibiting fornication under his own roof and keeping a dozen mistresses abroad."[71]

Laurens was heavily influenced by his son John, who was much more of a radical abolitionist than his father. During the Revolution, John drew the logical conclusion that it was the slaveholders who had "sunk the Africans & their descendants below the Standard of Humanity." This view was diametrically opposed to that of the elder Laurens. John, an American officer during the Revolution, felt strongly that slavery should be abolished and that a reasonable manner in

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[71]Laurens to James Laurens, 12 February 1763, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 248; James A. Rawley, "Henry Laurens and the Atlantic Slave Trade," unpublished paper obtained from Darold D. Wax, 1991, 17; Laurens to George Appleby, 28 February 1774, Papers of Henry Laurens, IX, 317.

which to put this principle into practice was by attempting to form a black regiment, whereby slaves would win their freedom by helping all Americans gain their independence. Richard Hargrove contended that "in bright contrast to his family tradition of almost single-minded devotion to the accumulation of wealth, John Laurens demonstrated remarkable concern for others." With the younger Laurens' focus upon service to humanity, it was not surprising, Hargrove contended, "to find him campaigning to free slaves or supporting the use of black troops."[72]

Henry and John Laurens had a rather lengthy exchange of letters concerning the formation of a black regiment. In trying to discourage his son's idea, Henry protested that John's "whole mind [was] enveloped in the Cloud of that project," and that "I will undertake to say there is not a Man in America of your opinion." The elder Laurens continued his argument that the black regiment would place slaves "into a state of servitude which will be esteemed by him infinitely worse than slavery." Earlier, Henry had asserted that John's plan would be "deemed [by the slaves as] the highest cruelty. & that to escape from it they would flee into the Woods_ that they would interpret your humanity to be an Exchange of

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[72]Joyce E. Chaplin, "Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815," 60; Richard J. Hargrove, "Portrait of a Southern Patriot: The Life and Death of John Laurens," in The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership. Essays in honor of John Richard Alden, ed. W. Robert Higgins (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 197-201.

Slavery a State & circumstance not only tolerable but comfortable from habit," and that it would be "intolerable" to be "taken from their Wives & Children & their little Plantations to the Field of Battle." The paternalistic Laurens was quick to feebly balance his argument by adding "All this by no means intimates that I am an Advocate for Slavery_ you know I am not, therefore it is unnecessary to attempt a vindication."[73]

John continued to plead his case from 1776 through 1779. He claimed to be willing to withstand ridicule for the sake of doing what was right. He desperately wanted to "transform the timid Slave into a firm defender of Liberty and render him worthy to enjoy it himself." All the while, Henry Laurens persisted in discouraging his son, cautioning him of the consequences of such rash actions. The more compassionate Laurens wrote "You seem to think, my dear Father, that men reconciled by long habit to the miseries of their Condition, would prefer their ignominious bonds to the untasted sweets of Liberty." John continued, "do you think they are so perfectly molded to their State as to be insensible that a better exists?" Not to be persuaded, the elder Laurens countered that his son "would not have heard the last jeer till the end" of his life. Henry was not to give in and the matter was ultimately dropped. Somehow, however, David Wallace managed

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[73]John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 26 October 1776, Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 6 February 1778, Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 28 January 1778, Papers of Henry Laurens, XI, 276-277, XII, 412, 368.

to contend in his History of South Carolina that *both* Laurenses urged the plan of enlisting slaves. Alas, Wallace's interpretation of the Laurens letters is interesting, as it is apparent that Henry Laurens was more pragmatic than his son and was unable to come to terms with losing his slaves. John did, however, influence his father, helping him to confront his ethical dilemma, though he never resolved it in quite the same manner that his son did.[74]

As much as Henry Laurens may have opposed slavery, as a pragmatist he was unwilling to publicly pursue this venture nor free his own slaves. He reconciled his unwillingness to manumit his slaves by the kind treatment shown them in order to make their bondage as comfortable as possible. As if to convince himself that he was, in fact, a kind master, he frequently related such information to correspondents. Ramsay, Wallace, and more recent historians have echoed this view. Laurens rationalized his slaves' comfortable existence, their being well provided for and in a state of contentment,

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[74]Although Henry Laurens wrote John several times that there was little or no support for his scheme, none other than Alexander Hamilton expressed some support. Hamilton wrote John Jay of the plan, arguing that "it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them [the slaves] in this way, the enemy probably will." Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, March 14, 1779, The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, II, 1779-1781. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cocke, eds., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 18; John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 17 February 1779, John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 22 January 1778, John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 1 March 1778, Papers of Henry Laurens, XII, 1, 305, 328, 391-392, 494; Wallace, South Carolina: A Short History, 289; John Laurens was killed in one of the last battles of the Revolutionary War while serving as a Colonel in the United States Army. Unfortunately, it is difficult to discern how much influence he actually had on his father. The two were quite close and, despite John Laurens' premature death, it appears that he demonstrated considerable influence upon Henry Laurens.

his ability to spare the rod, and his refusal to split up families.

Laurens painstakingly described his stance on slavery late in his life in a letter to Alexander Hamilton. Laurens maintained that since the new nation was opposed to abolishing slavery, he must act "therefore agreeable to the dictates of my Conscience." He added

> Some of my Negroes to whom I have offered freedom have declined the Bounty, they will live with me, to some of them I already allow Wages, to all of them every proper Indulgence, I will venture to say the whole are in more comfortable circumstances than any equal number of Peasantry in Europe, there is not a Beggar among them nor one unprovided with food, raiment & good Lodging . . . . The Lash is forbidden . . . . 'If you deserve whipping I shall conclude you don't love me & will sell you, otherwise I will never sell one of you . . . .' I believe no man gets more work from his Negroes than I do, at the same time they are my Watchmen and my friends; never was an absolute Monarch more happy in his Subjects than at the present time I am.

Laurens concluded that the southern states were regrettably not yet ready for emancipation of their slaves, and that were a "conversion" too long in the future, the effect would be "a direful Struggle." This letter to Hamilton goes a long way into summing up Laurens' views on slavery. The paternalistic Laurens just cannot understand that the slaves had lives of their own; their purpose on earth was apparently to serve their white 'Monarchs.' As long as the blacks fulfilled this prophecy with diligence and faithfulness, then surely they

were content.[75]

Laurens tried hard to satisfy his correspondents that he was a kind and generous master. He related that after returning home to Mepkin in 1774 after a three year absence in Europe he was so warmly greeted by his three house servants that they "drew tears from me by their humble & affectionate Salutes & Congratulations, my knees were clasped, my hands kissed, my feet embraced . . . . They encircled me, held my hand, hung upon me." Whether Laurens embellished this story is uncertain, but at any rate he rationalized his devotion from his slaves. By 1786 he remarked that he wished his slaves not to perform any more hard labor than absolutely necessary. "I have already excused them from hoeing, or weeding Indian corn which is hard Work, by introducing ploughs and fine Teams of horses, at a very great Expence to myself . . . . I know you will esteem this a Work of Benevolence." Without undue cynicism, it must be pointed out that Laurens was the consummate businessman, even late in his life. Surely he was cognizant of improved labor efficiency with increased automation. Laurens' attempts to justify his enslavement of blacks were weak. No matter how kind he thought he treated his slaves, the fact that he must try to rationalize his humane acts is in itself an indictment of their lack of

[75]Laurens to Alexander Hamilton, April 19, 1785, Doc. No. 85-0XXX, The Laurens Collection.

humanity within slavery.[76]

Laurens frequently expressed concern for his slaves being provided adequate clothes, shoes, and food. His letters are cloaked with compassion, as he records such sentiments as "my poor Negroes are barefooted, & the Weather very Cold . . . for Charity's sake, send me the remainder [of shoes] as speedily as possible." While such sentiments may have been sincere, after reading hundreds of his letters one cannot help but feel that Laurens sees profits slipping out of his pocketbook because of inadequately cared for slaves. Laurens thought of growing cotton on his plantations during the Revolution solely for the purpose of clothing his slaves, as European goods were now in short supply. Again, one could argue that this was a business deal and not merely an humane one. He has one overseer clothe his slaves "warm, strong, and cheaply as customary."[77]

Laurens constantly appeared to have a hidden agenda when it came to treating his slaves well. He related to one overseer that he "would rather be without Crops of Rice than gain the largest by one single Instance of Cruelty or Inhumanity." He orders the overseer to treat the slaves under

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[76]Philip D. Morgan, "Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston," 223; Laurens to John Laurens, 12 December 1774, Papers of Henry Laurens, X, 2-3; Laurens to Bridgen & Waller, January 7, 1786, Doc. No. 86-0XXX, The Laurens Collection.

[77]Laurens to William Bell, 22 September 1768 and 2 December 1786, Doc. No. 86-XXX, The Laurens Collection; Joyce E. Chaplin, "Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina, 1760-1815," The Journal of Southern History, LVII (May 1991), 179-183; Laurens to Felix Warley, 10 October 1771, Papers of Henry Laurens, VIII, 6.

his jurisdiction with "more humanity, Temper, and discretion." Laurens later adds, however, that his true concern was with slaves running away, as nine recently had from his plantation. Laurens also wrote of putting returned runaways in irons, and to "Spare no expence to take him if he attempts to run away." Laurens, despite his reputation for kindness, was utilitarian in the treatment of his slave property, and on occasion rebuked his overseers for not being forceful enough. He also tells one overseer to readily discern illnesses in his slave population before the maladies got out of hand (and his profits die with the slaves?). And Laurens sounded rather typical of South Carolina Lowcountry slaveholders when he instructed a schooner captain with whom he had sent two slaves aboard that the slaves "are entitled to no wages being my property as slaves, except clothing & provisions from me & good usage from you."[78]

Laurens also contended that he spared the rod when it came to punishing his slaves. Historians have continued to repeat these claims. On numerous occasions, however, Laurens acted contrary to his proclamations. He reported that one

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[78]Laurens to Lachlan McIntosh, 13 March 1773, Laurens to William Gambell, 15 March 1773, Laurens to John Loveday, 21 June 1777, Laurens to James Laurens, 5 December 1771, Laurens to Felix Warley, 10 October 1771, Laurens to John Jackson, 19 March 1766, Laurens to Peter Horlbeck, 15 May 1765, Papers of Henry Laurens, VII, 617, 621, XI, 386-387, VIII, 66-67, 6, V, 90, IV, 624. See also Laurens to Peter Horlbeck, 30 May 1765, to Abraham Schad, 23 August 1765, to John Lewis Gervais, 22 March-7 April 1773, and to John & Thomas Tipping, 4 December 1764, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV and VIII; Laurens to Capt. Magnus Watson, February 15, 1770, cited in Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1760 through the Stono Rebellion, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 204.

"Lazy Rascal" would "require some smart flogging before he grows better," and to an overseer he was "glad to find that you apply that useful ointment which you call stirrup oil [flogging] . . . . It is a sovereign remedy in some disorders." Several episodes required Laurens to order overseers "to exercise great severity," and if that failed the victims should be placed in irons. This type of response was given after an overseer reported to Laurens that he had given a slave a "Gentle Whipping." His use of the whip may have been relatively infrequent, it was frequent enough to be a deterring force of intimidation.[79]

Laurens further rationalized his kind treatment of his slaves by revealing that he would "rather lose a large annual profit by keeping my Negroes comfortably together in families than to avail myself gain by violent separation of Man & Wife, Parents & Children, my practice has ever been consistent with this Declaration." Earlier, he expressed similar sentiment and concluded that "slaves least [sic] a time should come when I should cry & there shall be none to pity me." Laurens encouraged his overseers on more distant plantations to also keep their slave families intact. He considered the separation of families to be the greatest punishment he could

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[79]McDonough, Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens, 466; Laurens to Joseph Brown, 21 August 1766, Laurens to William Smith, 25 April 1766, Laurens to William Brisbane, 17 October 1777, and John Lewis Gervais to Henry Laurens, 2 August 1777, Papers of Henry Laurens, V, 170-171, 120, XI, 562, and 414.

inflict upon his slaves and often used this as a scare tactic. If his threats were not heeded, however, he would not hesitate to sell troublesome slaves, breaking up families with few qualms. He noted once that the manner in which to discipline slaves was "Severity or Separation . . . the former may reduce & reform, but I prefer the latter." Laurens advised his overseers to sell runaways. They responded in kind, sometimes punishing *and* selling in order to set "an example to others." Laurens broke up families on a number of occasions, merely giving lip service to his scruples to the contrary, and this was a distinct form of manipulation of owner over slave.[80]

Frances Kemble articulated well in her Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation that "Though the Negroes are fed, clothed, and housed, and though the Irish peasant is starved, naked, and roofless, the bare name of freeman -- the lordship over his own person, the power to choose and will -- are blessings beyond food, raiment, or shelter." Historian James Oakes echoed Kemble, expounding that to the extent that southern masters defined themselves by how "kindly" they treated their slaves, they simply exposed the degree to which they had assimilated the assumptions of a society that was "learning to measure unfreedom by quantities of material

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[80]Laurens to Richard Oswald, 16 August 1783, Laurens Letterbook -- Jan. 4 - Aug. 19, 1783 (Roll #7, Microfilm); Laurens to Elias Ball, 1 April 1765, Laurens to Lachlan McIntosh, Laurens to Richard Oswald, Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 5 September 1777, Laurens to William Brisbane, 17 October 1777, John Lewis Gervais to Henry Laurens, 19 June and 2 July 1778, Papers of Henry Laurens, IV, 596, III, 361, V, 668, XI, 487, 562, and XIII, 494, and 540.

deprivation and physical suffering." John Laurens had grasped this concept before his untimely death, but his father failed to do so.[81]

It is evident that Henry Laurens struggled with the issue of abolishing slavery. Although David D. Wallace initiated an almost unbroken chain of historiographical argument that supposedly settled the score on the side of abolition, Laurens only freed a handful of his several hundred slaves. He purchased large numbers of slaves for his own use as late as 1773, several years after he had withdrawn from the slave trade and around the time that Wallace claimed Laurens was a confirmed abolitionist. One of Laurens' most often quoted letters established the basis for his reputation as a man of emancipation. Laurens wrote his son John in 1776, shortly after the signing of the Declaration of Independence:

> You know, my Dear Sir, I abhor Slavery, I was born in a Country where Slavery had been established by British Kings & Parliaments as well as by the Laws of that Country Ages before my existence, I found the Christian Religion & Slavery growing under the same authority & cultivation_ I nevertheless disliked it_ in former days there was no combatting the prejudices of Men supported by Interest, the day I hope is approaching when from principles of gratitude as well as justice every Man will strive to be foremost in shewing his readiness to comply with the Golden Rule . . . . I am not the Man who enslaved [my negroes], they are indebted to English Men for that favour, nevertheless I am devising means for manumitting many of them & for cutting off the entail of Slavery_ great powers oppose me, the Laws & Customs of my Country,

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[81]Frances Ann Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839, ed. John A. Scott (New York, 1863; New York, 1961), 3; James Oakes, Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), xv-xvi.

> my own & the avarice of my County Men_ What will my Children say if I deprive them of so much Estate? These are difficulties but not insuperable I will do as much as I can in my time and leave the rest to a better hand.[82]

Laurens wrote several other letters in the course of his lifetime that encouraged the termination of slavery or his intentions of manumitting his own. By 1783 he revealed that he was "no longer at a 'stand.'" While he attacked slavery in rather strong terms, these attacks were launched almost without exception in private correspondence. Laurens did not take a public stand against the peculiar institution; he was afraid of creating divisiveness within South Carolina and of having his own wealth reduced. He rationalized American slavery by putting the fault on the British for initiating the process, thereby removing some of the guilt from his Christian conscience. Furthermore, he advised -- in private correspondence -- that the emancipation of slaves be a gradual process so as not to upset the status quo too suddenly. he realized that there was little hop that complete emancipation would be achieved during his lifetime, yet he was not willing to initiate the process by establishing precedence. As a well-respected leader of the South Carolina elite, Laurens could have taken a more proactive stance on slavery and his voice would have been heard. Laurens has been described as a man of action rather than a philosopher, yet on the issue of

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[82]Laurens to John Knight, 2 December 1773, Papers of Henry Laurens, IX, 189; Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 389-391; Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, Papers of Henry Laurens, XI, 224-225.

slavery he was more a man of rhetoric and inaction.[83]

A primary reason for Laurens's refusal to manumit his slaves or from taking a more proactive stance in abolishing the institution was simple economics. He was "convinced that Negroes are the most useful Servants in these Southern climes." Moreover, during the Revolution, when he was caught up in the Revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and continued to formulate his opposition to slavery, Laurens was sustaining financial losses. As a true patriot he was willing, without complaint, to sacrifice a portion of his wealth for American independence, but was not amenable to liberating his slaves and thereby risk financial ruin. After peace had set in, he seemed to be averse to sacrificing his children's inheritance by manumitting his slaves, no matter what his personal sentiments. Laurens realized that slavery had become the framework of the entire economic and social fabric of South Carolina. Though he certainly felt guilt at the thought of enslaving blacks, he continued to subordinate his moral reservations to his personal economic concerns.[84]

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[83]Laurens to James Bourdieau, February 6, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection; Laurens to William Drayton, February 23, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection; McDonough, Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens, 441; Laurens to Richard Price, February 1, 1785, Doc. No. 140.85-0XX, The Laurens Collection; Moore, Henry Laurens: A Charleston Merchant in the Eighteenth Century, 197; Laurens to Richard Champion, July 5, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection; Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," 68; see also Laurens to John Ettwein, 19 March 1763, Papers of Henry Laurens, III, 374.

[84]Laurens to Andrew Turnbull, 14 November 1768, Papers of Henry Laurens, VI, 155-156; Laurens to James Laurens, October 18, 1779, Doc. No. 79-0XXX, The Laurens Collection; McDonough, Christopher Gadsden and Henry Laurens, 465.

Contrary to these personal economic concerns, Laurens believed that South Carolina would be better off both economically and socially without the convention of slavery. He recorded that slavery would make the Lowcountry elite "a weak and defenceless People, & may one day prove the destruction of the Sea Coast Inhabitants." He argued that children of slaveholders often became lazy, as they could not easily develop the ambition that Laurens possessed with slave labor all around them during their developmental years. Laurens also opposed slavery because it kept out white settlers and created an economic and social system characterized by a "glare of precarious riches . . . the possession of individuals" instead of the "riches of the State . . . greater and more permanent." Additionally, Laurens strongly believed that the only way to solve the credit problem facing the new nation in the 1780s was to prohibit both the importation of slaves and the institution of slavery itself. He used these arguments to support both views.[85]

Once Laurens had withdrawn from the slave trade and concentrated on planting, it was in his best interest economically for the slave trade to be abolished. This would lead to an increase in the value of his slaves and would also help prevent an overabundance of slaves in South Carolina, which could harm the economy of the state as a whole. He

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[85]Laurens to Mary Laurens, November 27, 1783, Doc. No. 83-0XX, The Laurens Collection; Wallace, The Life of Henry Laurens, 453-454; Laurens to James Bourdieau, May 6, 1785, Doc. No. 85-0XX, The Laurens Collection.

ultimately realized that slavery itself was not in the best economic interest of South Carolina, yet the personal economic consequences kept him from emancipating his own slaves or from publicly supporting abolition.

Henry Laurens once wrote "Thank God, I have acted agreeably to the dictates of my conscience, without respect to persons, and I trust my country will not condemn my conduct." His conduct as a slaveholder was not condemned by his country, nor later by historians. George C. Rogers, Jr. recently argued that as a slaveholder Laurens' plans to "'do as much as I can in my time & leave the rest to a better hand'" was the "essence of the sensible reformer." Yet, Laurens was not a reformer in the least. He never freed his slaves and he shied away from speaking out against slavery. Had he done so, with his social, economic, and political clout in the region, his voice certainly would have been heard above the crowd, ears likely would have perked up, and reform may have begun. Laurens was perhaps, arguably, a more 'kindly' master than some of his peers, yet he used the whip 'when necessary,' separated slave families against the 'dictates' of his conscience, and provided them only the minimal necessities required to labor most efficiently for his pocketbook. He privately opposed slavery and insisted that he planned to manumit his own slaves, yet his words were not followed by action. Laurens, along with the historiographical argument that has echoed for two centuries, cried that his Christian

convictions forced him to realize the evils of slavery, yet his personal economic motivations in this life triumphed over the spiritual concerns of the next. Frederic Bancroft's words over sixty years ago that tradition forgot the slaving and "embalmed Laurens as an antislavery man" seemed to be largely ignored by later historians.[86]

As an eighteenth-century Low Country South Carolina merchant-planter elite Henry Laurens was both typical and atypical of his gentry class. He was an astute businessman who worked extremely hard to accumulate wealth. Like many of his peers, much of his wealth was accrued through African sweat. Also like many of his peers, he was a racist who viewed slavery in rather conservative terms. Unlike many of the South Carolina elite, however, Laurens' business sense led him to diversify his holdings. Furthermore, he questioned slavery as a means of accumulating vast holdings, and confronted his conscience as to the ethical implications of slavery. Although he was a true patriot, he was also deeply loyal to South Carolina and to his region, much like future generations of South Carolinians. Laurens' powerful combination of Christianity, wealth, and power was not likely lost on later generations of southern elites. Alan Gallay claimed that the dominance of planter-elites in antebellum

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[86]Alan Gallay, The Formation of a Planter Elite, 59-61; Henry Laurens, "Notes," June 11, 1779, The Laurens Collection; George C. Rogers, Jr., "A Tribute to Henry Laurens," 27; Frederic Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1931), 3.

southern society was predicated upon the Christian paternalistic beliefs that rationalized and justified not only the exploitation of black slaves but the right of elites to rule over other whites. In Laurens the shrewd and calculating businessman triumphed, and the ambitious Laurens subordinated his conscience to the monetary gains of slavery. Henry Laurens illuminates much of the time and the world in which he lived, as well as future generations of southerners in the antebellum period.[87]

[87]Gallay, The Formation of a Planter Elite, 166.

# CHAPTER III

# CONCLUSION

Henry Laurens was truly an instrumental figure in the development of eighteenth-century South Carolina and his impact was felt throughout the region for generations. He was an important political leader both within the colony and state as well as a respected representative of the state nationally. He contributed significantly to the economic infrastructure of the Low Country as well, as both a merchant and planter. His story is important, and too often has been ignored outside the confines of South Carolina. It is important, however, that when proclaiming the history of Henry Laurens, one relates the whole story and analyzes the complete man.

Laurens was a man of complex emotions and motivations. He wrestled spiritually with the ethical questions of the slave trade and the institution of slavery. The inner warfare that created turbulence within Laurens' soul is revealed

throughout his correspondence. He was a man driven by ambition, a relentless businessman and public statesman who worked hard, slept little, and attained great worldly success. He meticulously recorded his various transactions, and while doing so unintentionally revealed his emotional reactions to them. He was haunted by inner demons that produced an ethical dilemma over the slavery issue. Other comtemporaries also struggled with the same moral issues. But in the end, Laurens made decisions based on his pragmatic business instincts and not his moral precepts. Laurens merits respect and continued study for his positive contributions to an emerging nation, but historians should also be cognizant that this man did not rise above humanity. Despite his ethical wrestling match, Laurens assisted in perpetuating South Carolina slavery and racism.

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